Moral Libertarian Horizon #6

The Libertarian Reformist Path

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Preface

This book is a collection of articles written in 2023-24, reflecting on the position of libertarianism in the contemporary Western political landscape, the positives of a moderate (or 'centrist') reformist path forward as an alternative to the increasingly extreme left-tribe and right-tribe, and, since both libertarianism and moderate reformism are clearly beneficial for healing our deeply divided and polarized politics, how we can reconcile libertarianism and reformism. The result is a proposal for a 'libertarian reformist' politics, that takes in the best parts of both traditions.

I. Why Libertarianism?

Why Allowing More Freedom is Generally the Morally Better Choice

Over the years, I have illustrated why values like free speech, free expression and freedom of conscience are important in multiple ways. However, what I call the 'competitive morality' case for freedom might yet be the most important reason why freedom is important to maintain. Given both the left and the right have become increasingly disrespectful towards long-standing norms that safeguard freedom in recent years, I think this is a message people across the Western world really need to hear right now.

Basically, history has shown us that things can be done better. The way we do things today is much improved compared with back in the middle ages, or even during the industrial revolution, for example. While improvements in material conditions, methods of production and technology are most often celebrated, morality

has also been improving over the generations. While things are still far from perfect, morality has overall been objectively improving over the centuries. We don't allow slavery, the torture of prisoners, and duels to the death anymore, for example. Given this history, there is every reason to believe that morality can continue to improve into the future.

The main drivers of improvement are innovation and competition. This is clear to see when we are talking about technology. However, it also applies to matters of morality. If everyone just accepted slavery as part of life, it would never have been abolished. This demonstrates the importance of allowing enough freedom for innovation. On the other hand, if the anti-slavery message wasn't able to compete with those arguing for the then-status quo on an equal footing, it might not have won out, despite being objectively more sound. This demonstrates the importance of maintaining a fair playing field in the marketplace of ideas.

Both of the aforementioned objectives would require free speech, free expression and freedom of conscience. It is freedom that both allows innovation, and allows fair competition in the marketplace of ideas. Therefore, ultimately it is freedom that allows morality to improve over time.

Looking at history would confirm this theory. Societies that were more free and open generated more improvements in morality. Even though the freedom to experiment might sometimes lead to errors too, overall speaking, allowing this freedom is worthwhile in the end, especially in light of the resulting improvements being able to benefit many generations to come. This is why, looking at it from a broad picture scale, allowing more freedom is objectively more moral. It is proven by both history and logic. I think we should take this into account when assessing political options, for example when voting. I believe that, generally speaking, supporting choices that are overall

orientated towards more freedom, as well as punishing politicians that actively advocate for less freedom, is generally correct as a principle.

Moral Libertarianism is the Solution to End the Culture Wars

The culture wars are evil. I think it's time we start coming up with solutions to end the culture wars. Given that this won't be an easy task, we have to come up with lots and lots of ideas, and put them into practice concurrently. This is why I'm going to dedicate quite a bit of time talking about ideas to help us end the culture wars going forward.

Here, I will expand on an idea I've long talked about: why re-strengthening the classical liberal consensus in general, and specifically arguing for the model of Moral Libertarianism, is the most effective way we can put an end to the culture wars. Classical liberalism was invented in Western Europe as a response to the religious conflicts that had plagued the continent since the late middle ages. The basic rationale was that, if government and politics basically stayed neutral on religious issues, then

the conflict could come to an end. This is the reason why America was founded without a state church, for example. Over time, liberalism was able to slowly bring the religious wars to an end. Besides that, liberalism also ushered in a new era of respect for free speech, freedom of conscience, pluralism in ideas and worldviews, and scientific discovery. It is arguably one of the most effective philosophies the West has ever come up with.

While the religious wars are long gone, old habits die hard in every culture. What the religious wars showed us was that in Western culture, issues of right and wrong are often settled by conflict rather than consensus. Compared with most other cultures on Earth, the West is much more prone to society-wide philosophical conflicts. Let's face it: this history, plus the individualistic nature of the West, means that we aren't going to become a consensus society anytime soon. If the arguments and conflicts aren't fought over

religion, then they are likely to be fought over other grounds. This is why, in an era where people are less religious than before, the culture wars have replaced the religious wars. And just like the religious wars, the culture wars are also inherently tied to political factions, with powerful players picking sides and rallying their supporters with highly moralistic rhetoric.

While the religious wars were cured by liberalism and its separation of church and state, this model of neutrality has not yet been fully extended to other, non-theological conflicts. This has effectively allowed the politicized religious wars of the past to be reborn as politicized culture wars. The 'woke' postmodern left, the reactionary 'postliberals', and every faction in between are effectively like the churches of the past, with both a worldview and doctrine that its followers have to adhere to, and a goal to capture and control the politics of the country and dictate its policies. Just like the religious wars, in the culture wars the stakes

are basically the triumph or defeat of one worldview or another, seen as a struggle between good and evil, where one's own side is good and the other side inevitably evil. This means that, just like several hundred years ago, the West is now on the brink of permanently heightened conflict and repeated tragedies, unless something is done to stop the culture wars in its tracks.

The answer, I believe, is to extend the classical liberal model of religious neutrality to other areas of life and culture generally. Rather than just being neutral about religion in a narrow sense, the state should be neutral about competing moral claims as much as possible. It should allow individuals, families and communities to preach and practice their sincerely held moral values, as long as it doesn't take away from the freedom of other individuals, families and communities to do the same. Competing moral worldviews can then truly compete in the marketplace of ideas, with

their success or failure ultimately judged by the objective reality of the long-term outcomes of their adherents. This is what Moral Libertarianism is, in a nutshell. When everyone can do their own thing, and they can be confident that in the future, should their views be correct, they will be rewarded by objective reality, there will be no need for the culture wars at all.

The actual reason why I have been so opposed to postmodern critical theory is that it is ultimately incompatible with the Moral Libertarian vision. The Moral Libertarian vision demands that every individual be given equal and maximum moral agency over their own actions, which postmodern activists are simply opposed to. Justified by a worldview of intersecting identity-based oppressor vs oppressed dynamics, and believing that our culture is a social construct to serve the oppressors, postmodernists won't even respect the most basic of moral freedoms, namely free

speech and freedom of conscience. This is why Moral Libertarianism and postmodern critical theory can't just co-exist in a compatible way: the triumph of one would necessary have to mean the defeat of the other, logically.

On the other hand, postmodern critical theory activists are not the only ones who are fueling the current culture wars, nor are they the only force out there making the Moral Libertarian vision difficult to achieve. Right-wing 'postliberal' culture warriors, often strongly influenced by old and new media in the service of organized right-wing politics, are no more respectful of other people's moral agency. Look no further than the War on Disney, the book bans and the drag bans. The fact is, over the past few years, a new, more authoritarian strain of the right has arisen, complete with its own thinkers, influencers and political leaders, and it is clearly intent on using state power to limit the freedoms of ordinary citizens. This is arguably even further away from equal moral agency

than what the postmodern left is doing. Their political methods actually move things in the most dangerous direction, i.e. back to the total conflation of culture, philosophy and tribal politics that caused the religious wars to erupt in Europe several hundred years ago.

As you can see, not only does Moral Libertarianism provide the way out of the culture wars, the political factions most engaged in the culture wars are also the ones least compatible with the Moral Libertarian ideal. Therefore, to uphold the Moral Libertarian ideal is both to point to the exit of the culture wars, as well as to take a stand against the worst of the culture warriors, at the same time. I believe this is the way the West must go, if only to preserve a peaceful society for the foreseeable future.

How the Dobbs Ruling Convinced Me to be 'Libertarian' Again

When SCOTUS handed down the Dobbs decision that overturned Roe v. Wade in 2022, I was not surprised about the result at all. Before the decision, I thought those who were expecting a more moderate result (e.g. preserving Roe but drawing the line at 15 weeks) were unrealistically optimistic, and it turned out that I was correct. After all, overturning Roe had long been the holy grail of the American 'conservative' legal movement, and they clearly had the numbers to achieve it now, so why would they back down at the last minute? As much as I had expected the result, there was something in the majority opinion written by Justice Samuel Alito the made me surprisingly uncomfortable. I had expected the court to overturn Roe based on a narrow literalist reading of the Ninth and Fourteenth Amendments of the US constitution alone, which I thought would have been enough to overturn Roe. However, Alito actually argued

that, while the Fourteenth amendment has been held to guarantee some rights that are not explicitly stated, such rights must be "deeply rooted in this Nation's history and tradition". Alito used the existence of numerous abortion bans throughout both American and British history to demonstrate that abortion bans were accepted for a long time in the Anglo-American legal tradition, and hence the right to abortion is not deeply rooted in America's history and tradition. Therefore, the case to overturn Roe in Dobbs was basically predicated on the idea that unenumerated rights could only exist if they are "deeply rooted in this Nation's history and tradition".

While the 'conservative' legal movement has long emphasized its commitment to 'originalism', i.e. reading legal documents like the US Constitution in a way that preserves their original meaning as much as possible, the Dobbs decision actually went way beyond just originalism. While originalism aims to read only

what is actually written in the legal document, and opposes taking a more expansive view of how the law should be applied, originalism does not prevent the law from applying to new circumstances not foreseen by the lawmakers at the time of the law's adoption. For example, the 2020 Bostock decision held that the sex discrimination provisions in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 applied to sexual orientation and gender identity, because 'an employer who fires an individual for being homosexual or transgender fires that person for traits or actions it would not have questioned in members of a different sex', and hence 'sex plays a necessary and undisguisable role in the decision'. This might be a scenario lawmakers didn't expect to see back in 1964, but it clearly fits into the scope of the law, even with the word 'sex' interpreted under its original 1964 meaning. Notably, two out of five conservative justices were willing to support this argument, and it was actually conservative Justice Neil Gorsuch, a Trump appointee, who wrote the majority opinion in this case. (Some have

argued that Gorsuch's opinion here is an example of textualism, but I think it is also originalism, because he was clearly using the word 'sex' to mean only biological sex, thus totally consistent with the meaning of the word in 1964.) Thus, while originalism is much more limited than for example a 'living constitution' approach when it comes to likelihood to lead to a 'progressive' decision, that possibility is still far from zero. On the other hand, the approach Alito used in Dobbs would have led to a 'progressive' decision inherently being impossible, because everything must be 'deeply rooted' in 'history and tradition', which means how things have been done in the past, whether they were correct or not, becomes the strongest justification for how things should be decided today. Hence, in my view, Dobbsism (I have no better term for it, unfortunately) leads to only the possibilities of preserving the status quo, or reverting to an earlier status quo (as Dobbs did). If Dobbsism were a political ideology, it would necessarily be reactionary by definition.

This brings me back to the use of the term 'libertarian' as opposed to 'classical liberal'. While the two terms have had very similar meanings for a long time, many 1990s and 2000s 'libertarians' switched to using 'classical liberal' somewhere in the 2010s, when extreme AnCap types, like those who booed people who supported driver's licenses, began to dominate many libertarian circles. We just didn't want to be associated with that kind of extremism. And 'classical liberal' sounded just right: it implied that we were sticking to the original meaning of 'liberal'. I also thought making this distinction was especially important, in a context where 'liberal' had come to mean anyone and anything left-of-center for many people, and a substantial part of the left was into illiberal practices like cancel culture and de-platforming.

However, the logic of the Dobbs decision, and the fact that some former 'classical liberals' ended up defecting to the reactionary-populist

New Right, got me thinking again. If we define our movement as one of sticking to an earlier version of liberalism, in opposition to a 'newer version', this would inherently be backwards looking in a way. Moreover, post-Dobbs, the Dobbsean logic has been taken up and used by the reactionary right more and more. In this context, the term 'classical liberalism' could be interpreted in a Dobbsean, rather than originalist, sense, i.e. defined not by how liberalism used to be defined, but rather, by how liberalism used to be like in practice. This would actually be very different, because liberalism really did not live up to its ideals and promises for a long time. For example, historically people who identified as liberals, or at least subscribed to some of the ideas of liberal thinkers, nevertheless supported slavery, colonialism, imperialist wars, denying political rights for the working class, and even McCarthyist witch hunts. These things are, by definition, not liberal, yet people who were supposedly liberal supported and practiced them during one point or another. On the other

hand, recent reforms like gay marriage are clearly liberal, even by the original definition of the word, but wouldn't have been 'deeply rooted' in the 'history and tradition' of liberalism, simply because gay relationships were socially taboo until very recently. While liberalism, as originally defined, is supposed to break down such taboos over time, and the knocking down of such taboos is testament to liberalism's success, a Dobbsean version of 'classical liberalism' would deny all this, and pretend that 'classical liberalism' does not have to support equal rights in marriage law. Thus, if 'classical liberalism' were defined in a Dobbsean way, then it would look very different to what we usually mean by liberalism, and also very reactionary indeed. I'm worried that this logic would inadvertently create a classical liberal-to-reactionary pipeline.

In contrast, 'libertarianism' implies a continued commitment to expand individual freedoms, including beyond what is 'deeply rooted' in

'history and tradition'. Libertarianism, as it has always been understood, is by definition not constrained by what happened in the past, and thus is unable to be corrupted by the Dobbsean logic. This is why I now think it was a mistake to abandon the 'libertarian' label to extremists, and identify as 'classical liberals' exclusively. What we need to do is to reclaim 'libertarianism', and show that it does not have to be an extremist, impractical philosophy. Libertarianism is classical liberalism, i.e. liberalism as originally defined, but it is also inherently forward looking, always looking for ways to further advance the cause of freedom, unconstrained by the reactionary Dobbsean logic that one must necessarily only look backwards. Of course, we don't have to give up the term 'classical liberalism' to Dobbsean reactionaries either: we can continue to use both terms interchangeably, picking the more suitable term depending on the context. 'Classical liberalism' emphasizes the roots of our ideas, while 'libertarianism' emphasizes our ongoing vision of progress. We certainly can't

give up on 'libertarianism', because its forward looking implications are very useful for preventing our movement from being dragged into a reactionary dead-end via Dobbsean logic.

Social Libertarianism is the Only Antidote to Trumpism, Populism and Christian Nationalism

In light of Donald Trump's victory in the 2024 US Presidential Elections, there has been a lot of soul searching among people who can be broadly described as liberal or center-left. While there are several major reasons for Kamala Harris's loss, including the economy and immigration, I think the most important observation about this election is that young men voted substantially more Republican, compared to any time in the past twenty years. In 2004, which was also the last time the Republicans won the popular vote, Bush-43 won most demographics, but young people under 30 clearly broke for John Kerry. This was the start of a long period where a clear majority of young adults voted Democratic. Therefore, what happened on Nov 5 represents the reversal of something that has been fundamentally true for a generation. It is a shift that the Democrats

clearly cannot ignore, if they still want to remain competitive in 2026 and 2028.

The movement of young men towards the right has been blamed on right-leaning podcasts, and often specifically Joe Rogan, who gave Trump a long interview and ultimately endorsed him. However, Rogan also said he would rather vote for Trump than Biden in 2020, and made some negative remarks about Biden too. It clearly didn't sway enough young men towards Trump back then. The fact is, what we are seeing with young men is a much bigger phenomenon than Rogan. It is a wholesale discomfort with the 'woke' culture that is often (fairly or unfairly) associated with the Democratic Party. You know, the culture that talks of oppressor vs. oppressed identity groups, and says that all men are guilty of benefiting from male privilege. I have long argued that this worldview is both unsound and harmful, in and of itself. Now, it seems that it is also at least partially responsible for giving us four more years of Trump.

The Democrats must distance themselves from wokeness, then. Other center-left parties across the West are also well advised to do so, especially since the movement of young men to the right (and sometimes the far-right) has been observed in multiple European countries too. To be fair, the Harris-Walz campaign did not contain anything woke, which shows that they have learned their lesson. However, what happened in this election showed that this was clearly not enough. With right-leaning media constantly portraying the Democrats as the woke party, they need to do much more to distance themselves from wokeness. I suggest that they take an active stand against the whole postmodern critical theory worldview. This would have the effect of acknowledging the root of the problem, and drawing a line in the sand. It would represent a much needed demonstration of willingness to pushback against the radical cultural-left, while not actually causing any harm to social justice in the real world. A win-win situation indeed. I actually

think it would be a good idea for prominent figures and influencers on the center-left to run a serious critique of postmodern critical theory, to show that one can (and should) reject such theory while embracing old-school liberal values. It would also provide a much needed counter-argument to the New Right's groundless assertion that liberalism is responsible for the rise of wokeness.

Besides decisively cutting ties with wokeness, the Democrats and other center-left parties also need to actually stand for something. Here, I believe they should look to the lessons of 20 years ago. After all, it was back then that they started to substantially pick up the support of young people, and unlike today, that included young men and women alike. Looking back, some have even argued that 2005 was the beginning of the buildup of a liberal wave, even though it certainly didn't look like it back then. The liberal shift was essentially built on opposition to several aspects of Bush-43's

presidency, namely the Iraq War, the erosion of civil liberties and free speech associated with the War on Terror, and the associated rise of the religious right, which was behind the swift enactment of gay marriage bans across America and the West, and also extreme policy proposals like requiring schools to teach 'intelligent design'. The important thing was that there was a consistent social libertarian case to be made against all these things, and it attracted the support of many young people back then. This was why opposition to the Iraq War, opposition to Bush-43 and support for Obama, and support for gay marriage became highly correlated. Looking back, it was actually social libertarianism that drew the majority of Millennials into the center-left, and created the famous 'Obama Coalition'. Later on, it would be the loss of social libertarianism, due to the mainstreaming of ideas from postmodern critical theory, that damaged this coalition more and more with time, ultimately leading to where we are now, i.e. substantial numbers of young people supporting the right in both

America and Europe. Therefore, the solution clearly lies in decisively rejecting postmodern critical theory, i.e. what we commonly call 'woke', and re-embracing social libertarianism.

Now that Trump is poised to return to the White House, right-wing populism is rising across the West, and Christian fundamentalism is making a big comeback ('Christian Nationalism' is basically just this, I actually prefer the old term to be honest), there will definitely be plenty of opportunities to revive the social libertarian critique. Indeed, it is perhaps the only way we can defeat right-wing populism, and save liberalism going forward. Of course, one has to actually embrace social libertarianism to take advantage of this opportunity. A woke movement or party that don't even believe in free speech just can't credibly call out right-wing authoritarianism from a social libertarian angle. This is why it's time to break up with the 2010s, and re-embrace the 2000s.

Why we can't Cede the Libertarian Movement to Authoritarian Pretenders

Today, I want to talk about why it is important that we, the people who actually believe in freedom, win the battle for the soul of libertarianism. After all, I've said repeatedly that labels don't matter all that much, that political philosophy is not the way to build a coalition to fight against extremism, that most ordinary middle class people probably don't care about political philosophy, and so on. Yet, I still believe that it is very important that true believers in freedom win the battle for the soul of libertarianism over so-called paleo-libertarians who pander to paleoconservatives, to the extent of sacrificing both civil liberties and free trade, 'beltway libertarians' who have no problem with neoconservative interventionism, neoreaction-adjacent pseudo-libertarian authoritarians who discredit us all, as well as AnCap-adjacent extremists.

The reason why we must win the battle for the soul of libertarianism is because it is simply the battle to define what freedom means, at least in the Western political context. Libertarianism is the only movement in the Western political landscape that consistently says it is for freedom first and foremost, and consistently speaks the language of freedom. If we cede the libertarian movement to people who don't actually put freedom first, or believe in freedom in a truly universal way, or else use libertarianism to justify their extreme agendas that have nothing to do with practical personal freedom, we will lose the language of freedom to people who don't actually believe in freedom, and will use it to justify its opposite. This will be a real tragedy, with serious implications across society, including implications on civil liberties, free speech and even world peace or lack thereof.

Another thing we need to recognize is that libertarianism has become the way it is because

of deliberate actions by forces from certain factions of the ruling class, acting on the small movement in the form of big sums of money over various periods of history, in order to promote their broader agendas. This, in my opinion, is what has pulled libertarianism into an unjustifiably close association with the political right, to the extent that the movement is now in danger of being swallowed by right-wing populism. First, it was the 'taxation is theft' but civil liberties and wars don't matter people. Later, it was the Tea Party people. Lately, it has been people from the populist right looking for anti-establishment credentials. All these people are not true believers in freedom, and we must not let them define the libertarian agenda going forward. I think remaining committed to a meaning of freedom that makes sense for ordinary people is the key to seeing through these schemes.

To defend libertarianism from all the aforementioned forces, I believe we need to call

out those who say they are freedom but are not really for freedom in any ordinarily meaningful sense of the word. We also need to continue to think about what freedom means, and the conditions under which it is achievable or not. I think that if we have a firm sense of this, we will not get tricked by the pretenders so easily.

II. Rethinking Libertarianism

The Problem with Libertarian Immediatism

Firstly, what is libertarian immediatism? It is the strand of libertarianism that strives to achieve libertarian conditions immediately. For example, libertarian immediatists often strive to cut government massively right now, and insist on this as their first policy priority. Libertarian immediatism has been the loudest, and hence most well-known, version of libertarianism in the past half a century. In fact, many people probably have not heard of the other form, libertarian gradualism. This is why libertarianism strikes most people as extreme and impractical almost by definition.

So what is the problem with libertarian immediatism? Put it simply, it has gotten us nowhere near achieving more liberty, or fulfilling the non-aggression principle. Firstly, the impractical nature of libertarian immediatist demands have turned many practical minded people away from libertarianism. This has

profound implications. For example, the lack of credibility of libertarianism among many moderates means that they could become less likely to listen to the case for things from enthusiastically safeguarding free speech, to market-based solutions for climate change, to a non-aggressive approach to policy both at home and abroad more generally. The weakness of libertarianism means its opposite prevails in practice, and we certainly don't want that.

Recently, I have come to appreciate that reform and change needs to be based on practical need rather than abstract philosophy. This is basically what genuine conservative philosophy (as opposed to reactionary thinking) has to teach progressives, and progressives of all persuasions would do well to learn this lesson. Given that libertarianism is by definition a progressive philosophy, I believe libertarians would do well to heed this lesson. If they did, they would at least stop squabbling over whether we should abolish driver's licenses, or whether the fire

department can be privatized. The endless talk over these theoretical issues, that have nothing to do with people's everyday lives, is making many people skeptical of libertarian philosophy, and rightly so.

Moreover, libertarian immediatist policies like cutting government massively right now have many unwanted social consequences. Libertarian immediatists are generally totally non-consequentialist in their philosophy, but most people actually judge ideas in part by the consequences they bring. Most people are going to judge a set of policies that could put many people into immediate poverty, as well as raise the crime rate massively, pretty negatively. If libertarianism is to find real popular support, it must become practical. And to become practical, we must abandon libertarian immediatism. There really is no other way.

The Road to Reclaiming Libertarianism and Stopping Populism

Although I have never been a libertarian immediatist, I have long been sympathetic to a particular strand of libertarianism: one that was most prominent around the time of the 2003 Iraq War. It was fiercely anti-Iraq war and pro-free speech. It was also a lot more skeptical of the right-wing compared to later versions of libertarianism, because it was the Republican Bush administration that launched the Iraq War after all. During and after the 2004 US elections, it also played an important role in exposing and opposing the religious right. There was even talk that, perhaps, libertarians and the center-left could form a 'liberaltarian' alliance against the Bush administration. Above all, aughts libertarianism was more practical, in that it didn't fall into the kind of useless fantasies associated with early-mid 2010s 'anarcho-capitalism', or the conspiracy theories

associated with late-2010s and early-2020s so-called 'conservatarianism'.

As I've maintained, libertarianism is a much needed force in the Western political landscape. Western democracies are based on political campaigns for the popular vote, which could encourage the rise of authoritarian populism. Libertarianism provides an important check against this danger. The recent collapse of libertarianism has enabled the rise of two forms of populist authoritarianism across many Western countries: the oppressor vs oppressed postmodern-critical far-left, and the culture war plus conspiracy theory far-right. If libertarianism could get back to the way it was 20 years ago, it would be a much more potent and productive force for good, and likely able to stop the rise of authoritarian populism. In this article, I am going to talk about how we can reclaim and restore libertarianism.

Firstly, a good libertarianism needs to be practical, rather than just theoretical. It needs to practically lead to more freedom for most people, in practice rather than just on paper. In the 1990s to early 2000s, beltway libertarians focused on cutting the size of government, and found themselves in bed with pro-war neoconservative Republicans who also shared the religious right's authoritarian values, i.e. people who stood against many things libertarians support. It was the backlash to this that eventually led to the kind of extreme anti-establishment libertarianism of the 2010s. The fact is, right now, in this world, cutting the size of government solely in economic terms is not the most important or effective way to bring about more freedom. The relentless focus on this detracts from the bigger picture, and leads to objectively non-libertarian outcomes overall. Instead of focusing on cutting government per se, perhaps new ideas like a universal basic income (UBI) could be explored. This would fulfill the objectives of maintaining social security, simplifying the bureaucracy and

further marketizing the economy at the same time. I think a UBI could be the key to the complete development and long-term maintenance of a fully market-based economy.

Secondly, a good libertarianism needs to be based on values, rather than just anti-establishment sentiment. The empty anti-establishment 'libertarianism' of the 2010s ultimately served as a pipeline to lead many into various forms of authoritarian-right politics, including Trumpism, the neoreaction movement, and even the alt-right occasionally. This ultimately led to the fracturing and discrediting of the libertarian brand. After all, most sane people are not going to support a 'libertarianism' that regularly produced converts to authoritarianism! To prevent this happening again, libertarianism must have a strong focus on individual freedom itself, rather than mindless anti-establishment sentiment. There should also be a particularly strong focus on opposing the arbitrary use of government

power, something classical liberals have insisted upon since the Old Whig times.

Finally, I believe a successful libertarianism needs to be justified in a moral sense. Traditionally, libertarians have sought to justify their program on the non-aggression principle (NAP), but this has proved to be rather limiting. Overall speaking, libertarians haven't been able to successfully defend the NAP against arguments from both the left and the right. The loss of former libertarians to the authoritarian right, to ideologies that flagrantly violate the NAP at every turn, throughout the 2010s is testament to this. Indeed, I would argue that the earlier beltway libertarians' unprincipled alliance with neoconservatives also demonstrates the weakness of the NAP. We clearly need something stronger. I think the weakness of the NAP is that it is bound to be violated at least some of the time in reality anyway. A society with law and order needs policing by definition, and policing would

inevitably violate the NAP at least sometimes. A society without policing is one without law and order, and the NAP would definitely be violated even more frequently in that case. This is why I have developed the Moral Libertarian principle of Equal (and maximum) Moral Agency for every individual. I think this is more practical to implement than the NAP in practice.

Freedom Does Not Exist in a Vacuum

I have always been a great supporter of freedom, and I have long been concerned that the West is losing its freedom. My concerns began in the aftermath of 9/11, when the Bush administration severely curtailed civil liberties in the name of stopping terrorism, violating long-standing guarantees of freedom and privacy in the process, and other governments around the Western world also followed suit. Soon after, the 2003 Iraq War was also justified as part of a wider 'war on terror', and opponents of the war were decried as unpatriotic or worse. The infamous Dixie Chicks incident proved how cancel culture was in full force back then, even though we didn't have that term yet. The next year saw a big moral panic wave over gay marriage driven by the religious right. In the 2004 US Elections, the victory of President Bush and the passage of anti-gay marriage constitutional amendments in many states were explained by the media as due to the rise of

'values voters', which further emboldened the religious right. By 2005, there were attempts to make schools teach 'intelligent design' in biology classes, and this campaign even spread outside America. Meanwhile, while libertarian ideas also gained popularity as a reaction to these instances of authoritarian overreach, they weren't gaining ground quickly enough to push back against the much larger wave of authoritarianism. A big reason was that libertarianism itself was often not very practical. The strict application of the 'non-aggression principle' (NAP) in real life was a tall order indeed. It just couldn't compete with the simple messaging of the authoritarians, which was rooted in the primal emotion of fear.

It was in this context that I first developed the foundational idea for Moral Libertarianism: that every individual should have equal and maximum moral agency. In practice, it would mean every individual having the right to their own moral decisions, as long as it does not

compromise another individual's right to the same. Every individual would be guaranteed their own free speech, freedom of conscience and freedom of expression, because these rights do not affect others' expression of the same rights. Every individual would also have freedom of action as long as it did not impinge on the same right for another individual, i.e. your right to swing your fist stops at my face. I think this is very fair, and much better than the religious right trying to shove their beliefs down people's throats, or politicians trying to get people to vote for them by fearmongering and scapegoating minorities and promising to impose authoritarian measures targeting those minorities.

Later on, I would also apply Moral Libertarian thinking to argue against the postmodern-critical theory left, which sees society and culture as an oppressor vs. oppressed landscape defined by groups based on immutable characteristics. I was in fact surprised that the

left was equally able to curtail free speech and other individual liberties at first, but that is exactly what started to happen in the mid-2010s. For some time the threat to freedom was coming much more from the left than the right, which was why my writing in that era mainly targeted the left. More recently, the illiberal right has been making a strong comeback, which means that the fight for freedom has effectively become a war on both sides for the first time in my lifetime. All throughout these developments, the Moral Libertarian idea of championing Equal Moral Agency for every individual, and associated ideas developed from this core idea, have been immensely helpful in anchoring my own thinking to a commitment to freedom, even as many others I once respected have strayed to either the authoritarian left or the authoritarian right along the way.

What I also learned in these two decades is that freedom does not exist in a vacuum. As I said

before, I have observed many previously pro-freedom individuals stray towards authoritarianism, of both the left-wing and right-wing variety. Some progressives who fought for free speech on the Iraq War in 2003 and against the religious right's anti-gay marriage push in 2004 somehow managed to support de-platforming and cancel culture in the late 2010s. Some self-identified classical liberals who opposed cancel culture and the illiberal left in the 2010s somehow flipped to support the populist reactionary culture warriors in the present, rationalizing Don't Say Gay, drag bans, draconian abortion bans and potential IVF restrictions as somehow necessary to 'fight wokeness'. In each case, I was deeply disappointed, but was also driven to find out what went wrong. What I learned was that freedom does not exist in a vacuum. As those who have been following me for some time would have heard me argue over the past two years, certain things are very bad for freedom, including tribalism, echo chambers, a lack of compassion, moral panics, all-or-none thinking,

and an over-commitment to abstract philosophy and theory. Freedom cannot exist in a vacuum, because it needs the opposite of these things to thrive, i.e. true diversity of opinion, an open and fair marketplace of ideas, a culture that encourages compassion, rationality and compromise, and prioritizing the practical resolution of problems over philosophical concerns. Absent a strong commitment to these things, any talk of freedom would soon turn into its opposite.

While I have talked a lot about the necessary conditions for freedom, up until now I have not yet re-integrated them with my Moral Libertarian model. For a long time, I have identified being overly abstract and impractical as the major weakness of classical libertarianism, and in developing Moral Libertarianism, I wished to develop a more practical model of libertarianism. However, in the early years, I was still narrowly focused on how to apply the principle of Equal Moral

Agency. While this would be much more practical than trying to apply the NAP, what I have realized is that it still narrowed the scope of freedom too much to be a strong enough practical safeguard for freedom. This is why, going forward, I believe Moral Libertarianism should be broadened to encompass the conditions that appear to be required for freedom to thrive. In this Moral Libertarianism 2.0, the principle of Equal Moral Agency will still be an important reference point to help us decide on moral questions and solutions, but more attention needs to be paid to the overall context too, to ensure that the conditions for freedom are truly met, and maintained in an ongoing sense. This would be well justified, because if the conditions for freedom aren't there, abstract talk about the principle of Equal Moral Agency would be effectively useless too.

Why Rethinking 'Economic Freedom' is the Key to Defeating the New Right

It has often been said that the New Right, or the 'dissident right', the new authoritarian reactionary movement that was born on the internet but has since spread into real life mainstream politics, has a 'Christian' and a 'Nietzschean' faction. The 'Christians', often ultra-traditionalist Catholic converts, yearn for a time when families were stable, and communities were strong, and believe that they could only bring this better society back by forcing society to accept their religious values. The 'Christians' are egalitarian because they truly believe the Christian teaching that all people are equal, but they are highly authoritarian, with their ideas often compared to the regime in The Handmaid's Tale. On the other hand, the 'Nietzscheans' are relatively less authoritarian, and are generally not concerned about religious values. However, unmoored by Christianity as well as rejecting the

Enlightenment as a whole, they fundamentally reject the idea that all people are equal. Instead, like Nietzsche himself, they believe that the elites should get to thrive, and remake society in their image, without being constrained by the demands of a society that values egalitarianism.

On the surface, the 'Christians' and the 'Nietzscheans' don't seem to have much in common. It has long been hypothesized that their common ground is in their opposition to the left, particularly the 'woke' left that arose in the 2010s. Wokeness is explicitly against traditional religious values, and does not even uphold the religious freedom of individuals as much as old-school liberalism does. Liberalism descended from the religious wars of Europe and hence has a special respect for religious freedom, which in practice often means carving out generous exceptions for individual believers in its otherwise progressive program. The 'woke' left, strongly rooted in postmodernism

and critical theory, sees religious belief as just another form of oppressive power that needs to be dismantled, and are hence unwilling to grant such exceptions on principle, even when they wouldn't amount to widespread discrimination in practice. Hence, in the balance between religious freedom and social justice, classical liberals give about equal consideration to the two, while the woke left always favors the latter to the exclusion of the former. Therefore, for the 'Christians', while they have never loved left-liberalism, wokeness represents an existential threat on another level. On the other hand, what the 'Nietzscheans' seem to fear most about wokeness is its inherent constrain on the free development of individuals. An ideology that primarily sees people as belonging to identity categories, rejects colorblind meritocracy as inherently 'systemically racist', and sometimes even rations speaking privileges based on immutable characteristics, is inherently going to limit individuals' free and spontaneous development. The Nietzscheans, in an echo of Nietzsche's own worries more than a

century ago, seem to fear that this would rob humanity of the potential for greatness.

While the reactions of both the 'Christians' and the 'Nietzscheans', in turning to a highly authoritarian politics that totally rejects the fundamentals of the Enlightenment, is definitely misguided and dangerous, I guess as a classical liberal I can see where their concerns are coming from. Indeed, I do share these concerns when it comes to wokeness, especially how it was sometimes practiced in the 2010s, even though I am neither Christian nor Nietzschean. (I also suspect that their embrace of fundamentalist religion or an anti-democratic Nietzschean worldview is a symptom of their frustrations, rather than a true commitment, in many cases.) However, the question is, why didn't these people just embrace classical liberalism or libertarianism? After all, these ideologies are firmly opposed to the excesses of wokeness that made them worried in the first place, and would satisfy their concerns. There

would likely still be some religious fundamentalists who wouldn't even accept a genuine 'live and let live' libertarianism, and extreme Nietzscheans who reject libertarianism because it would not allow them to dominate other people, and also actual white supremacists who reject classical liberalism's colorblind racial equality, but these kinds of extremists have always been around, and have always constituted only a small minority of the population. Most 'Christians' would likely accept a libertarianism that truly promises to leave them and their families alone to practice their faith with complete freedom, and most 'Nietzscheans' would likely accept a libertarianism that truly embraces meritocracy, and allows them to rise and fall on their own merit. And I also have faith that, in our modern society, most people are not white supremacists. From what I see, then, a successful libertarian movement would likely be able to take away the majority of the support and energy in the New Right, so that it would collapse.

But first, we do need to address the question, as to why these people didn't just embrace classical liberalism or libertarianism. Indeed, libertarianism experienced something like a renaissance in the early-to-mid 2010s, and was essentially the default ideology of the early woke skeptical movement. It wouldn't have been for a lack of awareness of libertarianism that the 'Christians' and the 'Nietzscheans' didn't become libertarians. Instead, they actively made the decision to reject libertarianism, and embrace authoritarianism. Some of the people that might have been on our side are now engaged in what I believe is the most dangerously authoritarian political movement since WWII, and this should merit a lot of soul searching among libertarians of all stripes.

The fact is, libertarianism is failing to attract people, and not just those who have joined the New Right either. If we zoom out of the New

Right for a while, and look at the broader picture, we would see that Pseudo-Libertarian Economics, what has long been deemed to be 'economic freedom' in the political mainstream, is being increasingly rejected across the political spectrum, and across basically all Western countries. The US Republican Party, once the home of small government, balanced budgets (at least theoretically) and free trade, has been almost completely taken over by Donald Trump's MAGA movement, which embraces protectionism and trade wars, while being slightly more generous about social security spending. They even invited the General President of the Teamsters union to their conference this year. In the British election this year, the more economically populist Reform UK Party took away a whole chunk of the Conservative vote, while failed Prime Minister Liz Truss, who heartily embraced the Reagan-Thatcher program as the antidote to Britain's economic malaise, lost her seat. In France, Marine Le Pen's National Rally, which openly embraces a substantial social welfare program,

has effectively supplanted Les Republicains to become the major party on the right. Meanwhile, at the other end of the political spectrum, staunchly left-wing Millennials and Zoomers have forced the US Democratic Party, the British Labour Party and the French Socialist Party alike to move leftwards, essentially giving up on the 'neoliberal' or 'third way' compromise made famous by Bill Clinton and Tony Blair in the 1990s. It is clear that, across the political spectrum, the kind of 'economic freedom' that was once popular in the late 20th century is increasingly being rejected. In a democracy, you simply can't sell a product that nobody wants to buy anymore. Clearly, 20th century-style neoliberal 'economic freedom' is not wanted, and this, I think, is what is dragging libertarianism down.

Like all the other voters rejecting neoliberalism, both the 'Christians' and the 'Nietzscheans' likely have good reasons to reject classical libertarianism's economic program, if you think

about it. The 'Christians' are very concerned about family breakdowns, declining birth rates, and failing communities. They tend to blame liberal culture for it, but I think economic reasons are probably more to blame. If we fixed the underlying economic conditions, these problems would likely become much improved if not completely go away, as long as we also don't allow postmodern critical theory (which is both divisive and anti-family) to dominate society. The dilemma for the 'Christians' here is that the left would fix the material economic conditions that underlie the problems, but would also likely limit their religious freedom, as well as allow postmodern critical theory to take over, at least to some extent. On the other hand, classical libertarianism would offer the opposite, i.e. freedom of religion, free speech to oppose postmodernism, but no relief economically. This logically leaves them with little choice but to embrace New Right authoritarianism, even if they didn't actually want to go that far initially. For the 'Nietzscheans', while they might not want to

admit it, they likely understand that Reaganite neoliberalism doesn't really offer a level playing field in terms of meritocracy. The use of taxpayer dollars towards corporate welfare, for example, makes a mockery of any commitment to free market economics. While classical libertarians have opposed corporate welfare, they have been practically powerless politically, and have usually sided with the 'lesser evil' in their eyes, which is just a fancy way to say support the party that hands out favors to corporations at the expense of enterprising individuals. This is why there is a general frustration towards corporations in the New Right, which has been (unhelpfully) channeled by politicians like Ron DeSantis into a war on 'woke corporations'. In many ways, the New Right culture wars are driven by frustration towards wokeness, but are also somewhat rooted in frustrations with both Reaganite pseudo-libertarian economic policies, and the failure of classical libertarianism to truly offer something better.

The logical conclusion here is that a libertarian program would likely be able to draw away most of the support of the New Right, and hence comprehensively defeat the New Right, if it can find and embrace a suitable economic program, in addition to continue upholding classical liberal values socially (which would of course include opposing wokeness). Right now, it is the failure of libertarianism to find and embrace a popular economic program that is dooming it, and enabling the rise of New Right populist authoritarianism instead. Therefore, to defeat the New Right, libertarians need to develop a better product to compete with it, by thinking outside the box economically. This is where reconciling aspects of left-libertarianism and right-libertarianism, to produce a new fusion, might be useful.

The Case for a Moderate Libertarianism Focused on Non-aggression

Let's face it. Libertarianism has gotten nowhere in the past twenty years, despite several waves of fleeting popularity. In fact, it is doing worse than getting nowhere: it has been rejected as fringe, extreme and crazy by many people, and is even tainted by association with the populist right in the eyes of some. Meanwhile, libertarianism's core belief in non-aggression is ignored in all this, and the anti-war movement is experiencing a moment of unpopularity not seen since the days of the Cold War. Libertarianism is dying, and the cause of peace is getting more distant by the day. Clearly, we need to change course right now.

I think the reason why we're in this situation is because of the dominance of libertarian immediatism in the past half a century. Libertarian immediatism is the strand of

libertarianism that strives to achieve libertarian conditions immediately. For example, libertarian immediatists often strive to cut government massively right now, and insist on this as their first policy priority. Libertarian immediatism has been the loudest, and hence most well-known, version of libertarianism in the past half a century. In fact, many people probably have not heard of the other form, libertarian gradualism. This is why libertarianism strikes most people as extreme and impractical almost by definition.

So what is the problem with libertarian immediatism? Put it simply, it has gotten us nowhere near achieving more liberty, or fulfilling the non-aggression principle. Firstly, the impractical nature of libertarian immediatist demands have turned many practical minded people away from libertarianism. This has profound implications. For example, the lack of credibility of libertarianism among many moderates means that they could become less

likely to listen to the case for things from enthusiastically safeguarding free speech, to market-based solutions for climate change, to a non-aggressive approach to policy both at home and abroad more generally. The weakness of libertarianism means its opposite prevails in practice, and we certainly don't want that.

Recently, I have come to appreciate that reform and change needs to be based on practical need rather than abstract philosophy. This is basically what genuine conservative philosophy (as opposed to reactionary thinking) has to teach progressives, and progressives of all persuasions would do well to learn this lesson. Given that libertarianism is by definition a progressive philosophy, I believe libertarians would do well to heed this lesson. If they did, they would at least stop squabbling over whether we should abolish driver's licenses, or whether the fire department can be privatized. The endless talk over these theoretical issues, that have nothing to do with people's everyday lives, is making

many people skeptical of libertarian philosophy, and rightly so.

Moreover, libertarian immediatist policies like cutting government massively right now have many unwanted social consequences. Libertarian immediatists are generally totally non-consequentialist in their philosophy, but most people actually judge ideas in part by the consequences they bring. Most people are going to judge a set of policies that could put many people into immediate poverty, as well as raise the crime rate massively, pretty negatively. If libertarianism is to find real popular support, it must become practical. And to become practical, we must abandon libertarian immediatism. There really is no other way.

Instead of worrying about 'cutting government' in the here and now, what we need is a libertarian movement that is focused on the idea of non-aggression. It would be even better

if it were economically agnostic, at least for the time being. Instead, we could start promoting the value of non-aggression via social issues. The culture wars have gotten all sides behaving pretty aggressively towards each other, and many 'live and let live' people are sick and tired of all this. The cancel culture of the 'woke' left, as well as the culture warriors of the authoritarian populist right, I think the silent majority is actually sick of both of them. There is a real opportunity to promote a politics based on a non-aggressive, live and let live ethos right now, and it would be a shame to let it go to waste. If we get the non-aggressive ethos firmly planted as the new consensus in domestic politics, it would also then help us make the case for non-aggression abroad. This, I believe, is where the hope for peace lies right now.

Three Things That Can Reunite Libertarians

I'm going to talk about how we can reunite different types of libertarians across the political spectrum again. Given that the usual attitude of libertarians is that 'only my version of libertarianism is real libertarianism', and that as the saying goes, if you have a room of libertarians there would be as many versions of libertarianism as there are people in the room, how can we hope to get different kinds of libertarians to come together at all? I believe the answer lies in finding, and emphasizing, our common ground. I can think of three areas where the vast majority of libertarians, if not all libertarians, can passionately agree on.

The first thing that can unite all libertarians is a fundamental belief in the importance of freedom. While this might just be stating the obvious, the rising level of authoritarianism in

both the left and the right has made the libertarians on both sides increasingly uncomfortable, which could be a catalyst for the formation of a new cross-political spectrum alliance for freedom. If left-libertarians and right-libertarians can come together for the sake of defending freedom, we might even see a real fundamental re-ordering of Western politics along libertarian-authoritarian lines in the future.

The second thing that can unite libertarians is a commitment to peace. Historically, libertarianism has often gained support for taking a principled stance on unnecessary and unjustified wars. I first became sympathetic to libertarian ideas during the 2003 Iraq War, for example. While left-libertarians and right-libertarians disagree on economic issues, they generally agree on non-violence, peace, and opposing unjust wars. What we need to remember is that, if left-libertarians and right-libertarians choose to work with the

authoritarians on their own side rather than choose to work with each other, there will never be any hope for world peace. What we also need to remember is that a hopeful commitment to world peace is becoming rarer among other ideologies, which means libertarians are becoming increasingly isolated on this. Neoliberals and neoconservatives generally don't believe that world peace is possible, nor do the National Conservatives of the New Right, if you examine the roots of their ideology. They all seem to think that the forever wars are inevitable, even if for different reasons. Which means libertarians probably have to go it alone to keep the hope of peace alive. This alone, I think, could be enough motivation for at least some left-libertarians and right-libertarians to work together, at least some of the time.

Last but certainly not least, an often overlooked thing that all kinds of libertarians share is a need for honesty. This honesty is actually what

makes it difficult for libertarians to form coalitions of convenience in the first place. However, the fact that both the left and the right have become very tribalist, very focused on winning and 'owning' the other side, and have resorted to dishonest tactics and hypocritical positioning to achieve what they want, has gotten libertarians on both sides more and more concerned. This, I think, could be something that could make libertarians of all stripes come together, and realize our fundamental similarities, despite our disagreements. In libertarianism, you will never find the manipulative philosophical sophistry of postmodernism, or the win at all costs mentality of the New Right. True libertarians never 'hide their power level', to borrow an increasingly popular saying. While left-libertarians and right-libertarians could disagree vehemently with each other, at least you can expect that all parties will remain honest and straightforward.

On the Dialectic of Freedom: Positive Libertarianism and Critical Libertarianism

Traditionally, the difference between left-libertarianism and right-libertarianism was seen as rooted mainly in economic issues, and finding common ground and building bridges on economic matters is surely going to be an important part of our work going forward. However, looking at things from a higher, more philosophical level, I think the main difference between left-leaning libertarians and right-leaning libertarians is the difference between emphasizing what I call 'positive libertarianism' vs what I call 'critical libertarianism'. Let me explain.

What I mean by 'positive libertarianism' is the idea that freedom can and should be positively advanced, and that more freedom also allows society to be improved, because rationality will prevail. This is the core foundational idea of

classical liberalism, and it has been behind many major improvements in Western society in the past several centuries. The abolition of slavery, universal suffrage, the civil rights movement, the expansion of free speech norms, the anti-war movement, and the legalization of interracial marriage and gay marriage were all inspired by the positive libertarian spirit.

On the other hand, we do have to acknowledge that not all social change, including changes that have been sold to us as 'progressive', actually lead to more freedom. In the past decade, wokeness was promoted as an idea that would advance social justice, but it clearly leads to a loss of freedom, including most importantly, free speech and freedom of conscience. This is where what I call 'critical libertarianism' comes into play. Critical libertarianism is all about protecting existing, hard won freedoms from being eroded by misguided attempts at change. It seeks to

critique all proposals for change, looking at ways they might intentionally or unintentionally undermine freedom. Indeed, I think a lot of classical conservative philosophy could fall under the critical libertarianism umbrella. Edmund Burke, often considered the father of conservatism, came up with his most famous ideas in the face of the authoritarian excesses of the French Revolution. More recently, I think liberal skepticism towards wokeness was another moment where a critical libertarian movement emerged.

While positive libertarianism and critical libertarianism seem like opposing forces, and they are indeed sometimes seen as in alignment with opposing sides of the political spectrum (positive libertarianism being aligned with forces seeking 'progress' and hence left-leaning, critical libertarianism being aligned with 'conservative' forces and hence right-leaning), they actually complement each other. Both are needed to promote and safeguard freedom. If

we only had positive libertarianism, the quest for freedom could be turned into its opposite by misguided steps forward. If we only had critical libertarianism, we could end up becoming so paranoid as to turn reactionary and hence authoritarian. Only an optimal balance of the two will lead to the maintenance and promotion of freedom. It's just like how the balance between a practical progressive impulse and a moderate, rational conservative impulse lead to a healthy and productive reformism.

Once we recognize that positive libertarianism and critical libertarianism are actually both needed for freedom, and can complement each other, we should be able to recognize the same about left-libertarians and right-libertarians. Rather than seeing them as separate, unrelated things, or worse, opposing parties, we should see them as two complementary halves that make up a whole. This should be the basis on

which we try to find common ground between left-libertarians and right-libertarians.

III. Thoughts on the Conditions for Freedom

Beware of the Abstract Philosophy Trap

In the previous decade, we saw the rise of a morally authoritarian brand of activism rooted in postmodern critical theories. This brand of activism attempted to push the largely popular and successful tradition of reformist liberalism aside, justified not by objective reality, but by their philosophical commitments only. This was a disaster both from the perspective of freedom itself, seen in the rise of cancel culture and its chilling effects on free speech and rational discussion of issues, as well as from the perspective of social justice, because it allowed the rise of a reactionary, and equally moral authoritarian, 'postliberal' right. Left-wing moral authoritarianism has led to right-wing moral authoritarianism, and the result is a double dose of unfreedom, as well as a lot of culture war tribalism.

Perhaps surprisingly, conservative philosophy actually provides some ammunition for moral

libertarians to fight back. As I've recently said, I have grown to appreciate conservative philosophy more as I have grown older. (I still don't support organized conservative politics, however, because I consider it to be reactionary and deeply moral authoritarian.) What I have come to appreciate is the insight that the forced application of abstract ideas and philosophy to real life situations is more often harmful than not, especially in terms of freedom. This is because abstract ideas are often a poor fit for practical reality, with all its nuances and complexities, and the force-fitting of ideal onto reality would require a lot of moral authoritarianism. This, I believe, forms the core point of the conservative philosophical cannon, going all the way back to Edmund Burke. Contrary to popular belief, this insight could actually be useful for a reformist liberal politics too. Postmodernism's misguided attempts at 'liberation' from 'oppressive social constructs', and the harms it has clearly caused to minority communities, is proof that progressive politics would benefit from a bit of conservative

philosophical influence at this point. On the other hand, the reactionary right's increasing unwillingness to heed this insight is what is making them increasingly authoritarian. How ironic would it be, if reformists of the center-left began quoting Burke to the 'postliberal' right?

The problem of trusting abstract ideas and philosophy to solve society's problems might be most clearly seen in the case of the forced application of postmodern critical theories, but this is actually a long-standing problem, particularly in so-called progressive circles. The endless arguments about whether particular ideas are 'progressive', 'feminist', and so on are a reflection of the obsession with the abstract, and such arguments at least imply that some ideas should be taboo in progressive circles, which is a highly morally authoritarian position to take. It was against this situation that I began writing about moral libertarianism. Remember, this was the case even before postmodernism became mainstream. As I often say in reply to

these debates, how about we just have more compassion for everyone? Of course, the problem is not limited to the left either. 20th-century 'fusionism' basically promoted a radical, abstract theory-over-reality economic policy, while tying it in a package with reactionary cultural politics, to make it sound 'conservative' when it was actually anything but conservative (going by the Burkean view).

Another important point to note is that the abstract opposition to abstract ideas can be just as bad for freedom too. In force-fitting all kinds of observed phenomenon into the abstract idea to be opposed, the nuances and complexities of reality are ignored, and the need for careful consideration of all sides of an issue is reflexively rejected. A good example is how the anti-woke movement went from being very morally libertarian, to being gradually hijacked by moral authoritarians. The trap here is seeing everything through a woke vs anti-woke lens, even when it is not objectively justified. For

example, corporations that take particular stances on social issues are painted as 'woke corporations' that are complicit in the postmodern deconstructionist agenda. This, in turn, is used to justify the government trampling on the freedom of private businesses to do business as they see fit. Another example is how parts of our cultural discourse previously considered normal, especially on matters related to race and sexuality, are now painted as part of a 'critical race theory' or 'queer theory' agenda by these reactionaries, with no solid evidence needed. This, again, is used to justify an authoritarian agenda including book bans, drag bans, unjustifiably broad laws that limit free speech in schools, and even the takeover of a college by the government in at least one case. All this results from a refusal to deal with reality as it really is, caused by the obsession with opposing an abstract idea in an abstract way.

Why Tribalism is Freedom's Worst Enemy

On a common sense level, there are already many reasons why tribalism is bad for freedom. Tribalism inhibits independent thinking, and allows bad ideas to be accepted without critical thinking and vigorous debate. This allows moral authoritarians to push through their policies without the usual level of scrutiny. If tribal echo chambers produce a moral panic, things are even worse, because the overwhelming emotionally-driven demand for immediate action leaves even less time and space for proper scrutiny and debate. This is why, historically, moral panics have always served morally coercive authoritarians well, and as a result caused a lot of unnecessary pain and suffering. Tribalism also puts pressure on people to stay in line with the group's consensus, thus having a chilling effect on free speech and freedom of conscience.

On a deeper level, tribalism is incompatible with freedom, because it is incompatible with rationality. Rationality is the best defense against authoritarianism, because it can be used to show why the wannabe authoritarians are objectively less moral. Furthermore, free speech, freedom of conscience and intellectual freedom are conducive to rationality, objectivity and good order, and are logically upheld and cherished when people are committed to these goals. Tribalism makes all this impossible, because when people want their team to win, to 'own' the other side at all costs, they can't be truly committed to rationality and objectivity anymore. Free speech and intellectual freedom aren't always good for 'owning' the other side, and they will naturally be swept aside when they become inconvenient for the culture warriors. This is how tribalism, often in the context of a culture war, allows rationality to be defeated, and morally unsound authoritarianism to win.

All this is actually playing out in real life, in the contemporary Western political landscape. In the 2010s, a form of left-wing moral coercion rooted in postmodern critical theory went mainstream, and the early anti-woke movement was essentially an attempt by moral libertarians to push back. However, later on, organized conservative politics, with a strong morally coercive bent itself, came to hijack at least part of the anti-woke movement. The so-called anti-woke cultural narrative right now consists of both important insights and truths, as well as distortions, conspiracy theories and outright lies. This combination of truths and untruths leads to two things: firstly, it weakens the argument against postmodern critical theory, and hinders the defense of values like free speech as a result. Secondly, some people could come to anti-wokeism because of the truths, and then be hooked by the untruths as well. This is not happening accidentally, it is happening because of tribalism, and the attempts by authoritarian politicians and political parties to take advantage of the

tribalism for political gain. The resulting contamination of genuinely rational arguments against postmodernism with culture war garbage leads to an inability to have a proper, intellectually sound debate about postmodernism, which ultimately reinforces the tribalism on all sides. Over time, this will send us all down an endless spiral further and further away from freedom and rationality, and ultimately allow the immoral authoritarians on both sides to win, if we allow things to go on like this.

I hope I have demonstrated why tribalism is the number one enemy of freedom, and needs to be resisted and opposed at all costs. It's like how runaway inflation is not compatible with a good economy. If you tolerate even a bit too much tribalism, we will soon find ourselves in a major recession of freedom, and it will be very difficult to recover from that.

Why Compassion is Important in the Defense of Free Speech

I am going to argue that compassion plays a key role in the maintenance of freedom, and the values that support freedom, like free speech. After all, one of the major arguments against morally coercive authoritarians is that they don't always get their morality right, despite their hubris, and their attempts to impose their moral positions on others is therefore harmful and oppressive. Moral libertarianism, then, is justified on the ethical principle of 'do no harm'. This argument is under appreciated in the contemporary West, and I think we should use it more.

As I said last time, the sentiment of pitting compassion against rationality, as seen in the rise of slogans like 'facts don't care about your feelings', have contributed to the erosion of freedom over the past decade. While I've long

argued that values like free speech are made meaningful by our commitment to objectivity and rationality, the values of freedom can actually be derived from compassion too. For example, free speech itself can be justified by compassion. If you truly care about other people, you would want to at least listen to what they have to say in full. If you have at least a bit of empathy for other people, you would also not support a public campaign to vilify, punish and cancel them just because of something they have said. Therefore, compassion bolsters the case for free speech, and also strengthens the case against cancel culture.

At this point, you might counter-argue that so-called safe speech practices are argued on the basis of compassion too. The fact is, the argument for 'safe speech' on the grounds of compassion is both ultimately faulty, and not entirely honest. It is faulty because it is ultimately not compassionate to tell minorities

they have to seek refuge in safe spaces, while refusing to have the difficult debates that will ultimately bring respect, acceptance and equality to such minorities. The avoidance of debate also makes reform more difficult to achieve, which ultimately hurts minorities too. Finally, the kind of morally coercive authoritarianism inherent in rejecting free speech is simply incompatible with being truly compassionate, if you look at the whole picture. Furthermore, we should recognize that 'safe speech' is actually a product of postmodern critical theory influence, and hence not rooted in pure compassion.

Part of the promise of classical liberalism is the ability for individuals to pursue happiness. This is reflected in 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness', and also in John Stuart Mill's utilitarian argument for liberalism. Given the importance of happiness and utility in the classical liberal cannon, it is a fundamentally important point that a truly liberal society must

not arbitrarily deny any individual's opportunity to pursue happiness. Cultural warriors whose aim is to 'own' the opposite tribe and make them suffer, or alternatively to turn the tables of oppression, are therefore by definition anti-liberal. Maintaining compassion helps us with the objective of respecting other people's rights to pursue happiness on their own terms, even when we don't necessarily agree with their views.

Finally, compassion also helps with preventing the conditions where authoritarianism is likely to be enabled, or where freedom is likely to be compromised. For example, tribalism can be prevented to a great extent by compassion and empathy. Also, when you are compassionate, you would not treat people as less important than the fulfillment of abstract ideas, which as I have previously discussed, is almost always bad for freedom.

Culture War Kills Independent Thinking

I want to talk about why I'm so opposed to the culture wars. The most fundamental reason why I'm vehemently opposed to the culture wars is that it kills independent thinking. People on both sides of the culture wars are often brainwashed to follow the standard narrative of their side on every hot button issue, without truly thinking for themselves where the truth is in each case. There are several ways the culture war dynamic makes independent thinking impossible. I will outline each of them.

Firstly, the us-vs-them tribalist dynamic hampers independent thinking. The mindset of wanting to 'own' your opponents all the time is simply incompatible with a commitment to finding out the truth. Those with this mindset simply can't accept that the other side can be partly right too, which is actually the case more often than not. Secondly, because of the need to defeat your opponents at all costs,

everything becomes justifiable. In the quest to defeat the other side, unsound ideas become accepted. Biased reporting, half-truths and semi-lies become accepted and normalized, as long as they are deemed 'useful', even if they actually have a harmful effect on real lives and/or broader society. Individuals are dehumanized, decency and compassion are dispensed with, as long as your side 'wins'. I am worried that in real life, we have already gotten to this phase. In extremely-online circles, things are much more advanced, as I will discuss later on.

Once a mindset where winning is more important than the truth is established, we enter the next phase. Bad faith actors, often with hidden (or not so hidden) extremist agendas come in to take advantage of the dynamic, to push their agendas. Unsound and dangerous ideas, from critical anarchism to religious authoritarianism and outright racism, ideas that would be swiftly rejected under

normal circumstances, often find receptive audiences among dedicated culture warriors looking for the next tool to attack their opponents with. The process of rational debate and assessment (as to whether the idea conforms with the truth) is effectively bypassed. This is how extreme ideas get to enter the mainstream.

Finally, the aforementioned dynamics eventually lead to the loss of a shared understanding of reality rooted in the objective truth. Once we reach this point, it becomes almost impossible for those on opposite sides to have a productive conversation. An endless stalemate ensures, further encouraging all the aforementioned dynamics. The truth is compromised further and further, and biased reporting and half-truths eventually evolve into basically outright lies. This is how we get to the crisis of people becoming unable to discern the truth at all. I believe the extremely-online

segment of the Western world is already at this phase, which is why online discourse is so toxic.

To halt and reverse this progression, and to return to a healthy society where there is a rational discourse rooted in the objective truth, we must put an end to the culture wars. The culture wars must be ended at all costs as a matter of emergency, because there is no other way out. We need to act before dehumanizing other individuals and disregarding the truth becomes normalized forever.

IV. The Case for Reformism (or 'Centrism')

Why We Need to Rejoin Liberalism, Progressivism and Conservatism

In recent years, I have been exploring my own sympathies with the liberal, progressive and conservative philosophical traditions, and I have found that I indeed have a lot of sympathy towards all three traditions. At first glance, this might seem odd: after all, aren't these traditions supposed to be opposed to each other? This thought made me dig deeper. And then I realized that, no, these philosophical traditions are not actually opposed to each other at all. It's just tribalist politics, and the political parties and politicians encouraging such tribalism, that make it seem like so.

When we talk about a philosophical tradition, we need to start by considering what that tradition represents. The (classical) liberal tradition represents individual freedom, free speech and freedom of conscience, and it has

been the tradition most geared towards the pursuit of the objective truth in Western history. The progressive tradition represents the passion to make things better for both people living in the here and now, as well as generations into the future, using the power of rationality, creativity and compassion. The conservative tradition represents the lived wisdom of history, and the warnings against misguided radicalism it brings. Seeing it this way, the three traditions are actually complementary. The progressive impulse requires the liberal commitment to free speech and objectivity to keep it from straying into either impractical fantasy or tyranny. The progressive impulse also requires the conservative tradition to keep its excesses in check, to prevent it from being needlessly divisive, and to prevent its descent into chaos, tyranny, or both. Liberalism requires the progressive impulse to give it meaning, and hence justification for continued relevance. It also requires the conservative tradition to defend it from illiberal radicalism. Finally,

conservatism is at its best when it is acting to provide checks and balances against potential progressive excesses. If the progressive impulse were to cease to exist, conservatism would have lost its original purpose, and would likely degenerate into paranoid reactionism.

Thinking about it this way, we can see the pathologies that are currently plaguing the Western political landscape, and how they have arisen in the first place: wokeness represents a form of progressivism that is without liberalism, and also resistant to the checks and balances of conservatism. On the level of theory, postmodern critical theory makes wokeness possible, by rejecting both the values that underpin the liberal tradition, and the entirety of our traditional inheritance that underpins conservatism, by painting both as a product of oppressive power relations. Thus postmodern critical theory has bred a 'progressivism' that is in practice regressive, harmful and oppressive. However, the reason why this could have

happened in the first place was because the circles in which postmodern critical theory had been able to take hold had already largely rejected liberalism, and made conservatism taboo. This largely happened in the aftermath of the radical wave of the 1960s-70s, and reflected the ideological worldview of the radical activists of that era. It was the creation of a 'progressive' intellectual scene that fundamentally rejected both liberal and conservative philosophy that made the development and rise of postmodern critical theory possible in the first place. Without such a scene, voices representing both the liberal and conservative traditions would have been able to provide a much needed checkmate to the postmodern critical theory worldview, and hence force the progressive impulse back onto its previous left-liberal path, where it was actually doing quite well.

A similar thing has actually been happening on the right too. Since the 1980s at least, the

American right has been out to make 'liberal' a dirty word, with considerable success. This has made any embrace of liberalism on the right more and more taboo over the years. Eventually, some people came to the conclusion that, to be truly on the right, one had to reject liberalism in its entirety. This is why moderate members of the US Republican Party and the UK Conservative Party have been derided by those on the hard right as RINOs or even 'leftists'. Some hardline New Righters even consider President Reagan to be not truly of the right! These developments have created the space for a 'conservatism' that is hostile to liberal values, as well as any hint of the progressive impulse, to develop. However, this new form of right-wing politics, by definition, strays from what true conservatism is, because as I have noted multiple times, true conservatism doesn't oppose change per se, but only radical change that is rooted mainly in abstract ideas, and/or represent a radical rupture from long-standing traditions. What we need to remember is that conservatism arose in response to radical

progressivism's excesses, and was an attempt to curb those excesses, with the most prominent historical example being Edmund Burke's critique of the French Revolution. However, what must also be remembered is that Burke, and many other prominent conservative thinkers, actually supported reasonable attempts at reformist change during their lifetime. Moreover, in the English-speaking West, liberalism has been a strong influence on our politics in one way or another since the days of the Magna Carta at least, which means that a genuine English-speaking conservatism must necessarily be liberal to a great extent. Thus, a 'conservatism' that fundamentally rejects both liberalism and progressivism cannot be a genuine conservatism. It would be reactionism, i.e. an attempt to completely reject all change, using whatever means possible. Looking back, the social policies of the right had already descended into reactionism in the late 20th century, a time when they ran scare campaigns against video games, rap music and gay marriage to win votes. This kind of political

campaign helped the right win elections, but it also cultivated a highly reactionary base, which led to the educational polarization of politics, and also sowed the seeds for Trumpist reactionary populism, as well as the illiberal (and at times anti-democratic) 'New Right' (which is basically the 'high fashion' counterpart to the 'pop culture' of Trumpism, and arguably more dangerous).

In conclusion, the progressive impulse without the guidance of liberal values and the checks and balances of conservatism led to the rise of wokeism, and 'conservatism' turned entirely against liberalism and progressivism led to the right becoming reactionary, which sowed the seeds for Trumpist reactionary populism. The misguided radical activists of the 1960s-70s created the conditions for the former, while the political strategy of the right in the 1980s-90s created the latter. Overall, it is the pitting of progressivism against liberalism/conservatism, and the pitting of conservatism against

liberalism/progressivism that has allowed all this to happen. Therefore, to heal the divide, to end the polarization, and to restore sanity, we need to urgently re-unite the liberal, progressive and conservative political traditions. This really is the antidote to the toxicity of our politics.

What is Liberalism and Conservatism?

What is Liberalism?

Contrary to popular belief, not everything that sounds 'progressive' or left-leaning is liberal. While liberalism has had a generally progressive effect on society over time, this is a result of following liberal values and processes.

To put it simply, liberalism is the political philosophy that focuses on individual freedom. However, that would indeed be too simple, because equality is also an important part of liberalism. After all, in feudal times, kings and nobility had far more freedom than anyone has now, in that they could own slaves and dictate others to act according to their will. In feudalism, some people have lots of freedom but others have none. Liberalism is different in that everyone gets their fair share of freedom.

Hence, liberalism is actually about distributing freedom equally between individuals.

Liberal values like freedom of conscience, free speech and 'live and let live' allow the marketplace of ideas to flourish. Ideas get debated, and the sound ones are eventually accepted and adopted by society. Traditions can be examined for potential for improvement through this process, and a sustainable, gradualist reformism is the result, which makes people's lives better over time. This is more rational than both a reactionary rejection of all change, and a revolutionary tearing down of everything that exists. This is why liberalism has been behind many of the most celebrated social reforms of the past three centuries in the West.

In short, liberalism is distinguished by its commitment to allow everyone their fair share of freedom. Its commitment to freedom in turn encourages the discovery of truth, and allows

ideas to be debated fairly, and sound reforms to be enacted over time. Its track record in aiding the discovery of the objective truth, and improving people's lives over time through social and political reform, is clearly evident in Western history since the Enlightenment.

What is Conservatism?

Now, we need to answer the question, 'what is conservatism'. Again, contrary to popular belief, conservatism isn't everything that is considered politically right-wing. It isn't everything supported by so-called 'conservative' political parties like the Republicans in America or the British Conservative Party. It is actually a political philosophy, a way to approach social and political issues.

British philosopher Edmund Burke is often considered the father of conservatism. His most

famous thoughts pertained to the French Revolution, which he lived through. He was very skeptical of the radical, 'tear everything down' approach of the French revolutionaries, as well as their over-commitment to abstract ideas as the way to progress society. What we need to remember is that, Burke was not against all change and progress, he actually supported relatively progressive positions during his lifetime. He was just against radical change that was rooted in abstract ideas rather than practical reality, and a total rejection of a given nation's traditions.

Hence, conservatism, as properly understood, is a philosophy that opposes radical change that is rooted in abstract ideas, and alien to a given nation's traditions. Change that is rooted in practical needs, and especially change that is rooted in a society's long-standing values, is not inherently opposed by conservative philosophy. Conservatism is therefore not reactionary! Instead, it is a philosophy that seeks to ground

progress in practical reality, and in the long-standing traditions of society.

At least in the English-speaking West, liberal values like free speech, freedom of conscience and 'live and let live' are indeed a long-standing part of our society. Therefore, conservatism, as properly understood, would aim to conserve these values too. Change and reform that arise out of liberal processes should also be favored over those that oppose liberal values and processes. Therefore, reactionary culture warriors, who oppose any and all change, and even resort to illiberal means to stop that change, are not really conservatives, properly understood.

We Need to Develop the Philosophy to Support a Centrist Politics

It is truly a difficult time to be a centrist right now. Just look at the fact that there are many more far-left and far-right influencers, podcasters, writers and personalities than centrist ones. Most people wouldn't want the thankless task of trying to recover sanity in a world gone mad, when they could be much more popular, and indeed chase after lucrative career opportunities, by choosing one of the extremes and catering exclusively to its supporters. As a centrist, not only are you likely to have a much smaller audience and no income for your hard work, you are also likely to be labelled as a weak, stupid, brainwashed, privileged defender of the status quo. Trust me, I've been called all of these things.

One of the major reasons why centrist politics is in this state is because it lacks a strong

philosophical backing. At least in the past seventy years or so, center-left and center-right ideologies have been defined mostly not by intellectual thinkers who think about issues on principle, but by politicians who take politically calculated positions and make unprincipled deals all the time. In contrast, both far-left constructionism and far-right reactionism were marginalized ideologies without much formal political power until recently, and their recent history was thus dominated by thinkers rather than politicians. This, in turn, means that their stances appear to be much more intellectual and principled, at least to certain people. This is a major reason why centrism is seen as unprincipled, perhaps even untenable in the long run, by more and more people. I truly fear that the center cannot hold if we don't develop a robust intellectual tradition to support it again.

Looking at the ideologies we consider moderate or centrist, which is mainly liberal utilitarianism

and organicist conservative-reformism, they once were intellectual powerhouses that had to contend with a very different status quo in times past, in order to gain support. For example, once upon a time, the human pursuit of happiness was not considered a legitimate goal, rather, people were expected to obey religious laws as interpreted by the official state church, whether they liked it or not. To argue against this could lead to charges of heresy. Similarly, people were expected to know and accept their place in the very hierarchical order of society. Any disobedience against this hierarchical order could be seen as a sign of rebellion, which was generally punishable by death. Thankfully, we don't live in a society like this anymore, because more liberal ideas about how society should be organized ultimately won out. Since then, however, the development of liberal, utilitarian and organicist philosophy and thinking seems to have slowly come to a stop. Liberal reformism became the status quo, which then became stale and despised. What needs to happen is a renewal on the philosophical,

intellectual side. Given that the philosophies which underpin liberal reformism once won the battle of ideas, I'm sure it can happen again, but we really need to work to make it happen.

Given the resurgence of essentially medieval ideas about how society should be organized on the far-right, we really need to revive the arguments our predecessors used to defeat the ancien regime of arbitrary power, and update them for the 21st century. On the other hand, 'progressive' intellectualism has come to be dominated by ideas that are basically revolutionary rather than reformist, and often anarchist-adjacent, which share the common assumption that tradition is inherently oppressive, and challenging and dismantling tradition is necessary for progress. However, history has demonstrated that this is not necessarily true. A liberal reformist program that aims to preserve and respect the spirit of traditions, underpinned by an organicist conservative philosophy, can also effectively

advance social justice, and a radical rupture with long-standing norms might not be necessary. It is up to us to make this argument, if only to balance out the excessive and counterproductive radicalism that has become the fashion of the day in many 'progressive' circles.

Rebuilding a Reformist Liberal Agenda

The past decade has been a truly insane time in Western politics. The culture wars have heated up like never before, and divisive and toxic ideas have been introduced into the mainstream from both sides. Those of us who continue to believe in classical liberal values like free speech and individual freedom have had to defend these values in an extraordinarily bold way, given that they were (and still are) under extraordinary threat. However, what I don't want to be lost in all this are other priorities in the big picture, such as the need to make society better and more just for disadvantaged minorities.

Let me say this first of all: I actually appreciate the passion those on the left have for improving society, and especially for making it more just for disadvantaged and historically oppressed minorities. Like many of you, I'm strongly passionate about what's right and wrong, and what's fair and just. For the record, I was an

ardent opponent of the Iraq War and supporter of gay marriage since 2003, well before either stance was popular to take. I have long had concerns about the racism I see in some parts of society, as well as its denial by some people. I want to see society do better, and the people living in it happier.

The main issue I have with 'the left' these days, broadly speaking, is the pervasive influence of postmodern critical theory. While there are indeed some on the left who continue to resist this ideology, including most prominently those old school class-first leftists, it remains the case that this ideology is almost everywhere on the activist left (as opposed to e.g. the establishment Democratic Party, which is still quite traditional overall). And it's not just my view: over the past few years, I have seen at least a handful of articles admitting that free speech is not a very popular position to take in the activist left nowadays, all written by committed leftists. Perhaps it's due to the fact

that those who disagree haven't pushed back enough. If this is the case, then I think they should bravely speak up.

If reasonable progressives who still believe in old-school reformism want to put forward proposals for reforms, in the liberal tradition that gave us things like universal suffrage and marriage equality, then I really want to hear about it. I am still eagerly interested in society making progress for justice and inclusion, in the old-school liberal way. I just don't believe in a language-obsessed and deconstructionist culture war politics rooted in the ideas of thinkers like Foucault and Marcuse, or an anarchist-adjacent politics supporting things like defund the police.

As I have often said, postmodern critical theory is not the key to social justice. Indeed, I believe that it is the enemy of true justice (and freedom). It is rooted not in the desire for

justice, or the desire to make things better for oppressed minorities, but the desire for a social revolution (with or without political revolution) that would fundamentally dismantle the values of the Enlightenment. Taken to its logical conclusion, I would call it 'critical anarchism', because it is effectively a process of challenging and replacing liberal values with ultra-anarchist values. Therefore, I believe that postmodern activists are effectively using embattled minorities as a battering ram to bring down society as we know it, in an attempt to usher in their ultra-anarchist utopia. Not only do most minorities don't want anarchism at all, history tells us such an unnecessary revolution would not bring good results. The upheaval and backlash alone would be very harmful to already embattled minorities. I think every would-be postmodern revolutionary needs to consider the harm they are potentially (directly or indirectly) inflicting on such minorities, and if a would-be revolutionary actually did so, they might just pull back from their revolutionary position. History has also taught us that life for

minorities can be improved through a process of gradual reformism instead, and there is no reason to believe that this tradition can't continue going forward.

For example, the gay marriage equality movement was able to achieve a lot in a relatively short amount of time, and continues to be a good template for other rights movements going forward. The appeal to liberty, equality before the law and family values has led to not only the legalization of gay marriage in almost every Western country within less than two decades, it also led to greatly increased acceptance of same-sex relationships. This should be a textbook example of how good activism is done. The fact that some LGBT activists have abandoned this model in favor of queer theory-inspired madness still baffles me. The only explanation I can find is intoxication by philosophical theories posing as reality. Therefore, I believe that what we need to do is to put an end to this kind of

brainwashing, by fundamentally challenging these unsound theories at their very root.

It is for this reason that I have strongly opposed critical race theory (CRT) in the past few years. The fact that some right-wing culture warriors have also made it a political football is not something I can control, and I never had any intention of echoing what they say. I have also spoken multiple times about their dishonest and authoritarian intentions in playing this political football. The way I see it is that many on the right, from Donald Trump to Ron DeSantis, simply have a muddied understanding of what CRT is, but they don't even care. All they want to do is to use it as a political football. It's similar to how DeSantis likes to use the word 'woke' in a deliberately vague way all the time. As someone who wants to have a philosophical discussion, I am actually very angry about this development. However, I can't just not speak up about CRT and let people in the center and the left think that it is a good

thing. It's not. It's not a good thing just because the bad guys hate it. This is a logical fallacy we must not fall for. CRT is a bad thing because it is ultimately a form of postmodern critical theory, and it is being used to advance critical anarchism into the mainstream. It needs to be resisted for this reason. I am not aiding the right-wing culture warriors just for saying this truth, and I really don't appreciate some on the left who accuse me of doing this. Especially when I have been taking a strong stance against right-wing culture warriorism all the time too.

To be honest, I am indeed very sick and tired of some on the left who keep accusing me of being on the same team as right-wing culture warriors like Trump and DeSantis just because I oppose postmodern critical theory, including critical race theory and queer theory. I am fundamentally opposed to culture warriorism no matter if it is from the left or the right. I see right-wing culture warriors attempting to recruit those in my position to their team all the time,

and I have resisted joining them for many years now. But I would indeed advise well-meaning progressives to drop the postmodernism, because it is how the reactionary right is picking up support at the moment.

If we could get behind a liberal reformist agenda again, I think we could make social justice not divisive again. This means we could achieve a better, broader consensus for much needed reforms. I truly hope we can embark on the long road of reformism again, and just forget that the past ten years of madness even happened at all.

What is a Practical Progressive?

Think about this: the word 'progressive' literally means forward looking. So any forward looking idea can be considered 'progressive', and anybody who is generally committed to a forward looking, positive and constructive attitude to things can be considered a 'progressive'. I think this was actually how it worked historically, for example with the 'progressive era' in American history. But nowadays, the meaning of 'progressive' has been distorted by some people. Apparently, for them, 'progressive' means adhering to particular left-wing theories, particularly the various critical theories and postmodern theories. The problem is, these theories are generally developed in academia rather than from practical situations, and they are heavily rooted in 19th and 20th century thinking. I don't see them as forward looking or open minded, and I certainly don't think this is the way to progress the 21st century West. Which is why, I

think, it's time to differentiate what I call practical progressivism from theoretical progressivism.

If we consider the word 'progressive' in a purely practical sense, then I guess any reform that improve people's lives can and should be considered progressive. This is also the most objective definition. From the practical progressive perspective, anything that can be objectively shown to improve people's lives is progressive, period. I think if 'progressive' is consistently defined this way, then most people would be able to get behind it. There would be far fewer people who consider themselves anti-progressive. This is why I often say that it is the hijacking of the word 'progressive' by theoretical progressives that has turned people towards being anti-progressive. This problem can be fixed simply by abandoning theoretical progressivism and fully embracing practical progressivism.

The problem with theoretical progressivism is that it is not always progressive in the practical sense. It might even be objectively regressive in the practical sense, for example, it makes lives worse, at least for some people, or it leads to increased conflict and misunderstanding in society. Theoretical progressives are too obsessed with putting their theory into practice, and they don't care that this might lead to practically regressive outcomes in the real world. For example, postmodernism has led activists to embrace new and clunky linguistic norms, that have led to difficulties in getting the point across and advancing our understanding of the objective truth. Identity politics has fractured society, and turned social progress into an us-vs-them thing. Widespread frustration with these developments has been seized upon by reactionary forces, and turned into fuel for a politics that aims to put the clock backwards by decades if not more. This is why, in the early 21st century West, theoretical progressivism is actually practically regressive.

We should abandon all these fancy and out-of-touch theories, and just focus on the question, is it going to improve things in the real world?

We Need to be Reasonable About Tradition

A major problem with some recent social justice demands is that they are antagonistic to long-standing social norms, even where they don't need to be. There is sometimes a deliberate attempt to challenge, invalidate, or otherwise subvert many social norms, even where it doesn't clearly lead to more social justice. I think this is due to the heavy influence from radical academic theories like social constructionism, deconstructionism, and postmodernism more generally. I believe this approach is fundamentally misguided. It is based too much on abstract philosophy, and not on real world practicality. In the real world, social norms are an important part of social life. Using a functionalist sociological lens, we can often see that they fulfill important social functions, particularly around integration and pattern maintenance. Without these norms, social cohesion could fall apart. Hence, most

people value social norms, and will defend them from unjustified attacks.

I'm not saying that social norms don't need to be changed or updated from time to time. What I'm saying is that, this must be a careful and well justified process. The mass deconstruction of social norms leads to potential instability, and would naturally be met with backlash. Instead, I suggest a much less invasive approach: only the social norms that actually adversely affect minorities should be changed, and they should be changed to the least extent needed to resolve the problem.

Let's make this clear: the idea that traditional norms are inherently oppressive, and need to be relentlessly challenged and deconstructed, is a product of postmodernism and critical theory, and these philosophical traditions are not known for being empirical or objective. The fact is, in the real world, the destruction of tradition

is actually not required for social justice. More often, traditional institutions, that are imperfect in some way, can be reformed to make them more inclusive and equitable, and that is usually adequate to address social justice concerns. There is simply no need to challenge everything, and tear everything down.

Existing traditions and institutions can often be reformed to become even better, without sacrificing their spirit or essential function. We can do this by bringing people together, to form a consensus through good-faith discussions, and to then pursue constructive reform. This is almost always the more satisfactory option for everyone involved. I think we really need to deprogram the postmodern critical theory mindset, so that progressive minded people can start to think of constructive reform as the default way to approach imperfect traditions, and abandon the destructive critical deconstruction ideology once and for all.

Moreover, the relentless deconstruction of tradition could also lead to dangerous outcomes. Fascist and fascist-adjacent movements gain popularity through promoting the idea that society is in decline, and the rapid deconstruction of traditional norms feeds into this sentiment. Once these reactionary movements get into power, they can actually do very real harm to the minorities they dislike. Far-left cultural radicalism thus often ends up hurting the people it claims to support. I've even said that it is the opposite of compassionate, because of this. I think we need to talk about this more, so truly compassionate people can make a more rational choice, when it comes to which kind of social progress they want to support.

Why Freedom Needs Practical Progressives and Moderate Conservatives

Recently, I've been talking about the conditions that promote, or hinder, freedom. Focusing on abstract ideas is bad for freedom. Aiming for practical solutions for real world problems is good for freedom. Tribalism is bad for freedom. Commitment to objectivity and rationality is good for freedom, as is commitment to building and maintaining a good order in society. Finally, compassion is also good for freedom, because it helps maintain other pro-freedom conditions, like objectivity, and prevent anti-freedom conditions, like tribalism. The goal, of course, is to move society towards the things that are conducive to freedom, and away from the things that are harmful for freedom.

I think we can tie the aforementioned observations into an overall outlook. I would call this the practical progressive outlook. It is

practical because it is centered on practical problem solving. That is, we would focus on practical solutions to resolve problems and improve things in the real world, and avoid being tied down by abstract philosophy and theory. Looking at the bigger picture, we would aim to ensure that the social order actually serves the needs of all, and aim to gradually improve everyone's ability to pursue a good life over time. Overall, I think it is actually very similar to the original aspirations of the classical liberals from the past.

Firstly, practical means not being tied down by ideology. Classical liberals like John Locke, Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill had a belief in freedom, and guiding values and principles stemming from this belief. But beyond this, they were not overly ideological, because that would hinder freedom itself. Classical liberals also understood that life is not perfect, and they would never let the perfect be the enemy of the good. The institutions built by followers of

classical liberal thinking were designed to promote freedom in a practical way, rather than to bring about an imagined utopia. Such institutions were also practically built with the need for people to compromise in mind. In contrast, some parts of the contemporary Western left, under the influence of postmodern critical theory, believe that seeing everything in oppressor vs. oppressed terms, trying to deconstruct every aspect of language and culture, mindlessly challenging traditional norms beyond actually demonstrable need, and refusing to compromise, would magically lead to some kind of utopia on Earth. This is clearly ideological and not practical. The results also speak for themselves: confusion over what social justice is, backlash to the concept of social justice itself, and a general rise in reactionary sentiment is what this ideology has brought. A practical progressivism will be able to stop and reverse all this, just by being, well, practical. It's time to throw away all the postmodern theory, and look at what could be

done to resolve problems and improve things in the real world.

We would also need to get over, or at least tame, the tribalist and adversarial nature of Western politics. As I recently demonstrated, 'left' and 'right' are arbitrary linguistic constructs, and treating them as real categories would just lead to more tribalism and irrationality, as well as a focus on the abstract rather than the practical. While 'progressive' and 'conservative' are often thought of as opposed to each other, this is actually an illusion caused by tribalism. Conservatism, as properly understood in the Burkean, philosophical sense, is not opposed to all change, but only radical change that is rooted in abstract ideas, that are alien to a given society's traditions. There is a good reason for this: change that is rooted in abstract philosophy rather than practical needs, especially if it is alien to the traditions of a given society, is likely to generate chaos, followed by a reactionary

response. Hence, Burkean conservatism is basically about saving the progressive impulse from its dark and destructive side. We need to reintegrate the Burkean conservative critique into progressive philosophy itself. This will ensure that any change will be born out of actual need, not philosophical theory. It will also ensure that any change will aim to build on our long-standing traditions, rather than be part of a misguided attempt to deconstruct everything and rebuild everything from scratch. Indeed, a combination of Burkean conservatism and the compassion driven desire to improve conditions for everyone, would make a very good foundation for a reformist politics.

On a related note, I really need to emphasize that to be practical inherently means being constructively reformist, and opposing attempts to burn everything to the ground and start over again, in the misguided hopes of reaching some magical utopia. The realistic among us would understand that the world is not perfect, and

can never be. Creating utopia on Earth is not possible, and attempting to do so will only lead to unnecessary misery and suffering. If you think about things practically, it is easy to understand that the odds of getting something good out of burning everything to the ground and starting from scratch is pretty low. This alone is more than enough reason to oppose such schemes of revolutionary change. Also, if you don't build on the traditions of a given society, all you are left with is trying to build a society upon abstract ideas, philosophy and theory, which we know is inevitably going to be inhumane and bad for freedom.

The Progressive Conservative Manifesto

An alternative model for social progress

1. Background

In the 2010s, there was some sort of awakening to social justice concerns across the West. At first, I welcomed this awakening, because I have always been compassionate, and have always believed that society ought to be made fairer and more accommodating to disadvantaged minorities. However, as the decade went on, things became unsettling. Feminists began accusing men of 'mansplaining' and guilty of upholding the 'patriarchy' on a widespread scale. Colorblindness began to be rejected, and replaced by 'race consciousness' in some circles. The 'born this way' argument that had served LGBT rights so well for decades was increasingly being replaced by weak and unscientific paradigms like 'gender is a social construct'.

Free speech was attacked, and 'safe speech' was championed instead. Later on, cancel culture would become widespread, and it would be justified on postmodernist talk about 'power dynamics'. Still later, society would go into full postmodernist mode, where activism often became about enforcing clumsy top-down linguistic changes, reinterpreting history to cast the West and its liberal institutions as irredeemably racist at their foundations, destroying statues of controversial historical figures and so on. It became clear to me that progressivism and social justice had lost their way.

I never left the ideals of social justice and progress, but the movement clearly left me behind. After several years of trying to understand what went wrong, I concluded that postmodern critical theory was to blame. I became 'anti-woke' in an attempt to cure the movement of its newfound postmodern critical theory influences, but later came to be

frustrated and ultimately heartbroken by the populist-reactionary New Right's hijacking of the whole anti-woke movement. When Ron DeSantis is using 'anti-woke' to bully Disney, and when Donald Trump is using 'anti-woke' to justify his radically regressive executive orders, you know the right-wing version of 'anti-woke' has jumped the shark, and has turned into something horribly authoritarian.

I want no part of the culture war right that Trump, DeSantis and their cheerleaders represent. Frankly, that movement insults my fundamental values like compassion, freedom and objectivity. Still, I feel the need to criticize the 'woke left', which is clearly not backing down from its misguided positions. After all, the excesses of the 2010s left had created the space for a toxic, reactionary movement to rise, which is at least partly responsible for allowing Trump to return to the White House, and it has also exhausted the optimistic passion of a substantial part of two generations (Millennials

and Zoomers), who are now too burnt out to engage in any meaningful movement to improve society. This is also not the first time the far-left's model of change has brought nothing but dangerously regressive backlash and exhaustion of the youth: the radicalism of the 1960s-70s gave way to three decades of right-wing dominance (the time during which my generation grew up in), while the radicalism of Europe in the early 20th century arguably paved the way for fascism.

It is clear that the far-left's model of change has failed repeatedly, and will always fail, leaving behind the people who would be harmed by the resulting backlash, and the broken passions of a generation of youth, every time. Such a faulty program must be put to a stop, period, so no more generations will be harmed in the future. The progressive conservative idea is a proposal for an alternative model for sustainable social change, one that will not result in the failures, disappointments and harms of the far-left

model. (Note that 'progressive conservative' refers to a philosophy that combines the progressive impulse with classical Burkean conservative philosophy, and it certainly does not have anything to do with the reactionary right-wing political parties that like to call themselves 'conservative'.)

2. What is the Progressive Conservative Idea

The Western political landscape of 2025 is basically a wasteland. Competing far-left and far-right factions shout at each other, taking turns to one-up each other, as if to compete for who can get the more extreme. Meanwhile, most of us know that the ideas offered by both camps are not only divisive, but will lead to widespread chaos and suffering in society. The far-left insists that everything about the status quo must be seen as a product of oppressor vs oppressed power dynamics, and it must all be deconstructed. Their nihilistically radical vision

has led to the division and polarization of society, confused discourse on many sensitive social issues, and burned out generations of idealistic young people. Their destructive ideology is clearly one major reason 'why we can't have good things'. Meanwhile, the far-right is being reactionary for the sake of being reactionary, with no limit in sight as to how far they want to wind things back. They hate modern society so much that some of them are even willing to cancel liberal democracy itself! The 'online right', where even being openly bigoted and attacking interracial marriage has become normalized, is the logical result of a movement that only seeks to 'own the libs', as they like to say.

The problem here is clear: the far-left doesn't believe in maintaining any part of our long-standing status quo, while the far-right doesn't believe in progressing society to make it more inclusive and equal, period. The far-left is allergic to the philosophical position of

conservatism, no matter how moderate or reasonable, while the far-right is allergic to any social progress. The far-left pays lip service to progressive ideals like social justice to justify its destructive mission, while the far-right pays lip service to traditionalism to justify its reactionary posture. But it doesn't have to be this way. By embracing both the progressive impulse and the conservative temperament, and seeking a happy balance or a functional fusion between the two, we can avoid both these nihilistic and harmful extremes. After all, as Teddy Roosevelt once said, 'wise progressivism and wise conservatism go hand in hand'. It's not too late to rediscover that tradition.

3. Progressive Conservatives Support Organic, Incremental Change

The English-speaking West has long been shaped by classical liberal values, which have provided us with such important pillars of our

society like free speech, freedom of thought and inquiry, freedom of conscience and free debate. These values have been crucial in allowing us to pursue the objective truth without favor or fear, and this sacred tradition must continue. Contrary to the propaganda of the populist right, there is no inherent conflict between conserving our traditions and upholding classical liberal values, rather, it is the introduction of illiberal views that goes against our long-standing traditions. Indeed, any 'conservatism' in the English-speaking West worth its name must, by definition, abide by our long-standing classical liberal values.

The 'progressive' part of progressive conservatism comes about largely due to the functions of the free marketplace of ideas. It cannot come from anywhere else, because the conservative view requires that all social change must be organic, born out of practical need, consistent with the spirit of long-standing traditions, and not primarily rooted in abstract

philosophy. In contrast, the progressive conservative rejects change that is primarily justified by abstract philosophy or ideology, like the deconstructive approach of postmodernism, or the invention of new language rules justified by the abstract need for equality in the sense of linguistic philosophy. As can be observed throughout history, ideas for change generally only get adopted by a critical mass of people in the marketplace of ideas, when there is a practical demonstrable need for the change, and that the change does not destroy important aspects of long-standing tradition. This means that the marketplace of ideas is an effective filter to filter our ideologically-driven attempts at forced social change, while allowing through proposals for change that actually have a practical benefit.

Therefore, the continued upholding of classical liberal values, and the continued development and progressive application of these values more consistently, and to more parts of our

lives, is entirely compatible with a progressive conservative vision, as long as these changes come about as a result of gradualist, practical reform, rather than radical transformation based on abstract philosophy. This is to say that, progressive conservatism is entirely compatible with libertarian reformism, even though it is incompatible with libertarian immediatism, not because of the 'libertarian' part, but because of the 'immediatist' part.

4. Progressive Conservatives Must Reject Reactionary Populism

It is regrettable to say that, right now, there is an increasingly popular brand of politics that often masquerades as a form of 'conservatism', that draws its support and power from fomenting moral panics, encouraging emotionally charged responses to delicate issues, and generally supporting a reactionary approach to controversial social issues.

Progressive conservatives reject this kind of politics because it centers political activity not around the pursuit of truth, but around the will to power. This inevitably leads to the disrespect and distortion of our collective understanding of the objective truth, with deleterious consequences on both individuals and society as a whole flowing from that.

The fact is, we must have an open society that welcomes the input of new ideas, if we are to 'progress' in any way. As previously described, given the progressive conservative's insistence that any change must be organic, the input of new ideas into society's collective conscience and the fair consideration of these ideas would represent the only way to acceptably bring about social change. The reactionary right's promotion of moral panics and tribalism prevents this from happening in a healthy way, and is hence incompatible with the progressive conservative project.

Moreover, the reactionary right's disrespect towards long-standing liberal-democratic institutions, particularly guardrails and checks and balances on power, in their pursuit of their political goals, is inherently incompatible with the conservative temperament, and the reasons why this temperament provides the necessary checks and balances on misguided radical designs. Indeed, reactionary populism is one such misguided radical design, that genuine conservatism needs to work to keep in check. Therefore, progressive conservatives must call out reactionary populism masquerading as 'conservatism', and oppose its radical excesses on principle.

Like all other classical liberals and conservatives, we value what is objectively, morally correct to do, and entirely reject the oppressor vs oppressed worldview and the general worldview of social constructionism and deconstructionism that is rooted in postmodern critical theory. Our grounds for rejecting

postmodern critical theory in its entirety are strong, and we must continue to argue on those grounds. However, rejection of postmodern critical theory must be done in a rational and intellectual way, and must not be allowed to become an excuse for an anti-intellectual reactionary politics, which would defeat the whole point of progressive conservatism.

5. Answering Criticisms of Progressive Conservatism

Critics of the left, particularly the far-left, often charge progressive conservatism, or ideologies similar to it, with being ineffective in actually bringing about needed change that would benefit the disadvantaged. However, a fair examination of history would show that it is the tireless reformers who work on society's existing foundations, and gradually push it in the direction of more freedom and equality over time, who achieved the most when it came

to actual beneficial change. Radicals generally talked a big game, but only ended up generating big waves of reactionary sentiment that sometimes produced dangerous outcomes. (In fact, I would argue that we are living through one now.)

The populist right often contend that progressive conservatism is not real conservatism because it is just 'progressivism driving at the speed limit'. We agree that progressive conservatism is indeed 'progressivism driving at the speed limit'. Conservatism is what gives us this speed limit, and prevents us from veering off course and down a cliff, and is therefore much needed and appreciated. What the populist right gets wrong is the definition and role of 'conservatism'. To be conservative is to apply the brakes on radical, unjustified change, by insisting that change occurs as a result of practical need, rational deliberation and broad-based consensus. It is not to reject all change outright.

And it is certainly not to run scare campaigns and moral panics against any and all proposals for change. Furthermore, and it bears repeating, romanticizing the past and justifying the use of extensive state power to bring back the 'glorious' past is not conservatism, it is more like fascism, which genuine conservatives should reject.

V. Reconciling Libertarianism and Reformism

Reconciling Libertarianism and Reformism

I am going to talk about my project to reconcile libertarianism and reformism.

On one hand, I have been sympathetic to libertarian thinking for more than 20 years, even though I have to acknowledge that libertarian immediatism is not realistic at all, and the dominance of immediatists have seriously harmed the popularity of libertarianism. I first became interested in libertarianism during the 2003 Iraq War, when the right was trying to silence anti-war and anti-Bush speech, including the infamous cancellation of the Dixie Chicks. Given that we live in a moment where the postmodern left practices cancel culture regularly, and the populist right thrives on banning books, drag queens, abortion and even masks, it is clear that society needs a big dose of libertarianism ASAP. We need to make libertarianism credible and popular again for this to happen.

On the other hand, over my observation and involvement in the Western political landscape of the past 21 years, I have gradually come to develop an appreciation of reformism. I believe the heart and soul of reformism is basically the classical liberal belief that society and people's lives can be made better via empiricism and rationality, tempered by the Burkean conservative view that any change should be based on practical needs rather than abstract ideas, and should be gradualist and consistent with a given society's traditions rather than revolutionary and abrupt. Note that genuine Burkean conservative philosophy, developed in response to the events of the French Revolution, is very different from what so-called conservative political parties represent today. I have stated this point many times in the past, but it bears repeating, because this is very important to understand. Anyway, over the years I have come to the firm conclusion that only a reformist politics can provided sustainable progress for society, by avoiding

both misguided radicalism and reactionary backlash.

The first problem we have here is that most libertarian thinking that has been developed over the past few decades, especially the so-called libertarianism of the 2010s, is fundamentally faulty on some level, which makes it support the opposite of liberty some point down the line. In the 1980s-90s the beltway libertarians and their obsession with cutting government dominated. These people ended up doing nothing to advance individual liberty per se, and some even sided with the Bush administration's 2003 Iraq War, which was a total sellout of libertarian values. On the other side were the paleolibertarians, a faction that were steadfast in their anti-war beliefs but sided with far-right paleoconservatives on most other issues. This paleolibertarianism was the precursor to what became known as the 'libertarian to alt-right' pipeline in the 2010s, and was arguably the precursor to neoreaction

thinking, which is clearly not libertarian at all. Later on, there was 'anarcho-capitalism', which is a very extreme form of libertarianism that opposes government in all its forms, and fantasizes about things like private police and fire departments. I think it is this kind of extremism that eventually gave rise to the conspiracy thinking that ultimately discredited libertarianism by around 2020.

The second problem we have is that most of the libertarian thinking that has been developed over the past few decades is simply incompatible with reformism. They all want government gone, and right now. This, I think, is the reason for both the unprincipledness and the tendency towards extremism. Therefore, to make libertarianism credible again, it needs to be realigned towards the reformist philosophy. And it's not as difficult as some might think. As I said before, reformism is basically liberal rationality plus conservative cautiousness and gradualism. Both the classical liberal emphasis

of rationality, and the conservative emphasis that reform should be based on practical needs rather than abstract ideas, can modify libertarianism to make it more reformist and practical. This, in turn, would make it more credible, and hopefully more popular. By making libertarianism credible and popular again, we can build a strong bulwark to prevent both the illiberal left and the illiberal right from crushing individual freedom with their culture war agendas.

To reconcile libertarianism and reformism, I believe we need to further develop the philosophy of both traditions more fully. In particular, we need to separate the core strands of thinking of both traditions from what has been happening in the crazy politics of the past 10-15 years. From there, we need to identify the common ground between the two traditions, and the areas where they might be able to supplement each other. Right now, I can think of attention to the complexities of reality,

respect for different opinions, and compassion as a few areas of common ground between libertarians and reformists. I'm sure there are more to discover. This will be a major focus of my work going forward.

What a Centrist Libertarian Program Looks Like in Practice

In recent years, I've come to identify as both a centrist and a libertarian. I've explained numerous times elsewhere why I identify with these labels. But still, some people seem to think it's a contradiction. And it really shouldn't be. I mean, if someone told you that they identified as being on the right and a libertarian, that would make sense to most people. Alternatively, if someone told you that they identified as a leftist and a libertarian, that would still make sense at least to people who are familiar with political philosophy. In other words, right-libertarianism is not only real but also the default mode of libertarianism in the English-speaking West, and left-libertarianism is at least a very real thing that is well understood by many politically engaged people. On the other hand, most people still seem to be unable to imagine what a centrist libertarianism looks like.

To explain centrist libertarianism, I think we should start with left-libertarianism vs right-libertarianism. The differences between left-libertarians and right-libertarians ultimately lie in what they believe to be the biggest barriers to freedom. Traditionally, right-libertarians believe that the government is the biggest barrier to freedom, and left-libertarians believe that capitalism is the biggest barrier to freedom. In recent times, cultural views have also entered the conversation. Here, right-libertarians tend to believe that the 'woke' establishment and its institutions are the most important enemy of freedom, while left-libertarians tend to see the same with religion and traditional values. The clarity of who the 'enemy' is means that both left-libertarians and right-libertarians tend to have quite extreme, and therefore 'immediatist', policy positions, and they believe that if they were allowed to get their way, liberty would be realized almost overnight.

Centrist libertarians are different from both left-libertarians and right-libertarians in that, while we aim for the maximization of freedom like all other libertarians, we understand that the conditions that favor or disfavor freedom are multifactorial. We don't believe that the left or the right exclusively has the answers to what makes a society free. Rather, we empirically observe what conditions are conducive to freedom in practice, and what conditions are harmful to freedom in practice. The set of 'conditions for freedom' that we care about are much larger than the simplistic views of both left-libertarians and right-libertarians. For example, polarization, echo chambers, loss of respect for science and objective truth, and an over-commitment to abstract philosophy are all harmful for freedom. Both left-libertarians and right-libertarians fail to see all this, because they are too obsessed with their own ideology. Centrist libertarianism, in contrast, is much more empirical and practical.

This also means that a centrist libertarianism is necessarily a gradualist libertarianism. When you believe that freedom is multifactorial, and that there is no simple fix that would magically take us to freedom utopia, you understand that the road to more freedom lies in trial and error, give and take, and in both promoting new forms of freedom, as well as safeguarding existing forms of freedom. Like other centrists, we understand that making good, sustainable policy lies in balance and compromise, and aiming for overnight perfection is just a recipe for disaster. This is in contrast to both left-libertarians and right-libertarians, who mostly agree with the broader left and the broader right respectively as to who is the 'enemy', and find almost no room for agreement with the other side. This is what leads to many right-libertarians embracing policy positions very similar to that of the Republican Freedom Caucus, and many left-libertarians embracing wokeness to some extent, even though that ideology is clearly anti-free speech and individual liberty. Of course, we centrists know

that both the hard-left and the hard-right are actually not that good for freedom in practice. As centrists, we are able to see the pitfalls inherent in both left-wing and right-wing politics, and their anti-freedom implications.

Centrist libertarianism also differs from pure 'centrism' in an important way. Unlike centrists who are not libertarians, we still insist on prioritizing our general goal of promoting freedom when it comes to what we are willing to support, and the kind of compromises that we are willing to make. For example, a centrist libertarian will not agree to a platform that results in clearly less freedom than the status quo, no matter what benefits its supporters claim it will bring. Also, in hammering out compromises, we will always bring the case for freedom to the table, and argue that a policy of agreeing to disagree and respecting each other's freedom will often be the best form of compromise. Finally, our commitment to freedom means that we will not fall for

'populist' policy platforms that combine social and economic authoritarianism, even if they do superficially combine policies from the left and the right. We want to take the best parts from both sides, not the worst parts.

The Neo Strategy: A Centrist Strategy for Libertarianism

Where is libertarianism these days? To put it mildly, not a significant political force, and also going nowhere. Ever since the Mises Caucus took over the US Libertarian Party, and took out all the cultural stances from the platform, support appears to have collapsed even further. At this rate, I think there is a real likelihood that the Libertarian Party will be supplanted by either the Forward Party or the Green Party as the third largest party by next year's election. Let's face it: libertarianism is effectively dying, and if we do nothing, it will be too late to save it.

Part 1: The Failures of Paleolibertarianism and Beltway Libertarianism

Let's be honest. One important reason libertarianism just can't get off the ground is

paleolibertarianism, otherwise known as the paleo strategy. While libertarianism did enjoy several brief surges of support in the past 20 years, including during and after the 2003 Iraq War, during and after the 2012 Ron Paul campaign, and during the free speech wave of the mid-2010s, none of these surges lasted. People flocked to libertarianism because they were attracted by its anti-war and free speech platform, but other things turned them away. The paleo strategy was basically an attempt to align libertarianism with paleoconservatism, which in practice meant trying to recruit racist and reactionary people into the movement. There were two main justifications for this: firstly, it was the end of the Cold War, and we had an opportunity to put an end to the military industrial complex. Paleoconservatives were fellow travelers in this regard. Secondly, a populist movement against the elite establishment would likely be good for freedom. However, on both fronts, the results of the paleo strategy are a clear failure by now: more than 30 years after the end of the Cold

War, America and its allies are as hawkish as ever. And although there is now a right-populist movement in full force, it seeks not to restore classical liberalism but to abolish it. The new populist movement is an alliance between paleoconservatives, religious authoritarians and theocrats, neoreactionaries, and even a few fascists, with the libertarian voice made redundant. Just how libertarianism, a movement meant to resurrect classical liberal values in the 20th century West, aided the rise of a big anti-liberal movement in the 21st century West, deserves some in-depth study and soul searching at least.

The problem with paleolibertarianism is that it tried to build a movement with the wrong base, and build alliances with the wrong people. Paleoconservatives, racists, reactionaries and the religious right are always going to prefer authoritarianism. These people don't have a libertarian bone in them. It's almost like trying to get Elon Musk or Bill Gates to support

socialism. It's just not happening. Meanwhile, by being seen to be associated with racists and reactionaries, the libertarian movement lost many opportunities to build its base with young intellectuals dissatisfied with the status quo and technocratic neoliberalism. The far-left has had a near monopoly on this market in the past 15 years or so, which is why the postmodern deconstructionist movement I call 'critical anarchism' is now so large that it poses a real threat to free speech. This means that, not only did the paleos make libertarianism lose vital opportunities, they effectively aided the growth of not one, but two, very illiberal movements.

To be fair, paleolibertarianism arose as a response to another kind of failed libertarianism: so-called beltway libertarianism. As the name suggests, this refers to a brand of libertarianism that lived within think tanks with close ties to establishment politics. Back in 1980-2016 or so, the US Republican Party, and to some extent their counterparts in other

Western countries, followed an ideology called fusionism, which included free market economics (with lots of corporate welfare), a hawkish foreign policy, and conservative religious values. Beltway libertarians believed that they could work within this paradigm, and push for more free market policies. Their obsession with libertarian immediatism (i.e. shrinking government as quickly as possible) made them blind to the fact that Republican fusionism was not a movement for freedom at all, but a front for a bunch of vested interests. Given this, they were not going to let go of corporate welfare or the military industrial complex anytime soon. At least the paleos could see this. They woke up to the fact that beltway libertarianism would never be able to bring an end to the endless, needless wars. This is why, the answer to the paleo failure is not to return to beltway libertarianism. (I also think that both the paleos and the beltways share one critical fault: they are too close to the Republican Party.)

To make libertarianism viable, we need to take the libertarian movement away from both paleolibertarians and beltway libertarians. To be able to do this, we need to build an alternative base to take the movement back. One that can actually develop a pro-liberty consensus, unlike the populist right.

Part 2: A Centrist Libertarian Strategy

I would call the new strategy the 'neo strategy', for several reasons. Firstly, it is a new strategy. Secondly, it is diametrically opposite to the paleo strategy. Finally, just as paleolibertarians wanted to attract paleoconservative support, we want to attract would-be neoliberals. Not that I'm a fan of neoliberalism: their foreign policy views are a disaster, as their support for the 2003 Iraq War showed. However, the kind of people who would normally support technocratic neoliberalism are, in one word, 'moderates': sensible, non-extreme, rational,

compassionate people, the kind of base that we would want. The paleos failed because they attracted the wrong kind of people, built the wrong kind of base, and ultimately aimed for the wrong kind of momentum. Having a centrist, sensible base would prevent that.

The path of the neo strategy runs through the center, not the left or the right. Classical liberalism and the political center are a natural fit, in the context of the early 21st century West, while both extremes are openly anti-liberal. Therefore, we need to first encourage a revival of the philosophical traditions of the center, and pit them against the alternatives at the extremes. These include genuine Burkean conservatism on the center-right, and a reasonable, gradualist, reformist progressivism on the center-left. Both of these traditions are highly compatible with classical liberal values, while their further-right and further-left rivals are not. We need to relentlessly point this out.

Part 3: The Strategy: To Expose the Hypocrisy of Coalition Politics

The core strategy is to persuade both the Burkean center-right and the gradualist center-left that a libertarian politics is a better bet than their current coalition politics, in terms of achieving their desired outcomes. On paper, this should not be difficult: classical liberal values are conducive to both Burkean conservatism and reformist liberalism, and the rise of illiberal alternatives on the far-left and the far-right are making moderates on both sides pretty uncomfortable. However, there's also something called tribalism, which makes people rationalize that their side is always right, even if it sounds wrong. It's the reason why many Republicans ultimately voted for Trump in both 2016 and 2020, despite not being truly comfortable with his politics. To get people to see the truth, we need to first get them to overcome the tribalism. This represents yet another important part of the neo strategy. We

then need to get them to see that both the left-coalition and the right-coalition, as it stands, is hypocritical and at least partially illiberal, because of the need to pander to the extremes. This situation is getting worse, because the extremes are getting more and more influential. The silver lining is that we now have a real chance to get moderates on both sides to abandon tribalist coalition politics.

The other thing that must be done is to implement ranked choice voting (RCV). Without this, providing a centrist alternative of any kind, including of the libertarian kind, will be broadly seen as a spoiler (just see how the current discussion of a No Labels alternative for next year is being received). This will severely hamper the neo strategy. Instead, we should refrain from electoral politics unless and until RCV has been implemented. Before then, we can work to amplify the voices of liberty on both sides, and build the coming libertarian consensus in preparation. But we absolutely

cannot be seen as spoilers. Therefore, we should push for RCV, and not participate directly in electoral politics before this happens.

Conclusions

The neo strategy provides a new path forward to revive classical liberal values in the context of the 21st century West. This path goes through the moderate center of the political landscape, and builds alliances with both moderate Burkean conservatives on the center-right and moderate reformist liberals on the center-left. We then aim to get them to see the hypocrisy and authoritarianism inherent in both the left-coalition and the right-coalition, in order to convince them that a libertarian politics is the only way they can achieve their goals. Finally, we push for the implementation of ranked choice voting, so that in the future, a centrist libertarian alternative can be provided at the ballot box without becoming a spoiler.

VI. Extended Thoughts and Further Justification for a Libertarian Reformism

We Need Free Speech, but we Also Need Good Speech

In the second half of the 2010s, as incidents of cancel culture ramped up rapidly across the West, and anti-free speech philosophical theories appeared to get some mainstream traction, a new free speech movement arose in response. While there was only mixed results when it came to defending free speech itself, there was at least a revival in interest in classical liberal values, which I thought would be sustained for at least a generation. Sadly, it appears that the 2010s free speech movement has fizzled out rapidly. You don't hear much about the importance of free speech these days, except from a handful of dedicated activists like myself.

Surprisingly and sadly, some who supported the free speech movement in the 2010s have turned to an authoritarian-right politics that

includes bans on everything from controversial books to drag queens. Elon Musk's supposedly pro-free speech takeover of Twitter has also been disappointing, with the platform now so full of open racists, conspiracy theories and culture war stuff that it is arguably worse for rational discourse than before (which I didn't imagine was even possible a year ago). Musk himself also turned out to be no better than the previous people in charge of Twitter: in June, he declared that the word 'cisgender' would be treated as a slur on Twitter. While I don't use that word personally because of its controversial connotations, this still represents censorship on behalf of one side of the culture wars. It just shows that Musk is not above meddling in the marketplace of ideas either. Meanwhile, some people (who I will not name), who used to defend free speech all the time, have now become very friendly with the 'postliberal' authoritarians, and accordingly, they never seem to discuss free speech anymore. Instead of defending classical liberal values, they now blame these values for giving

rise to 'wokeism', against all reasonable logic. Sometimes, it seems that very few people are truly dedicated to free speech these days.

Having thought about all this for a while, I now think that the 2010s free speech movement stalled because something was missing: we were good at defending free speech and opposing cancel culture. But we weren't putting enough effort into arguing why free speech is necessary. The necessity of free speech is inherently linked to the marketplace of ideas. The reason we need to support free speech and oppose cancel culture is because we want all ideas to get a fair hearing in the marketplace of ideas, so the most sound ideas can win out. If this is the vision we are committed to, then we would also recognize that we need to have good speech too. What I mean by good speech is speech that is delivered in a good faith attempt to get to the truth, rather than to score culture war points, promote the interests of political parties or particular politicians, or simply to

'troll' your enemies. I think we can all agree that blatant racism, 'triggering' your opponents, and deliberately selecting stories to create a biased perception about particular issues aren't examples of good speech, at the very minimum. Sadly, I'm seeing way too much of this kind of speech in so-called anti-woke circles lately. If we truly believe in a healthy and functional marketplace of ideas, I think we need to call out such bad faith speech when we see it, to halt and prevent its proliferation. If we allow this bad faith speech to grow unchecked, it will poison the marketplace of ideas, no less than cancel culture and censorship.

I now want to focus on bad speech in the service of culture war purposes in particular. I think an important thing we need to stress is that free speech must be above the culture wars. The example from Twitter cited above is a good example of the ridiculous things that can happen when free speech is not placed above the culture wars. In the 2010s some on the

political right attempted to place free speech within the culture wars, and in hindsight we should have much more strongly resisted this move. Seeing free speech not as a universal value but as a culture war weapon is what has led to the kind of hypocrisy we now see among right-wing culture warriors, where it is not OK to de-platform their favorite speakers, but it is good to de-platform books they don't like, drag queens, Bud Light ads, and the Pride section in Target. People with this kind of attitude are no better than the cancel culture activists on the left, and they should never have been welcomed into the free speech movement in the first place. I apologize on behalf of the whole movement for having been too lenient on them back in the 2010s. Going forward, the free speech movement must be impartial and dedicated to a fair marketplace of ideas, and it can only be that way if it remains above all culture war politics, and left vs right politics more generally.

Right now, free speech continues to be under threat, which means the free speech movement really needs to be revived. Besides the continued threat from postmodern critical theory-inspired activism on the left, the rise of the authoritarian postliberal right has made the future of free speech even more fragile than before. Meanwhile, the culture wars and the associated polarization and tribalism also pose great threats to both free speech itself and the health of the marketplace of ideas. All this means that it is more important than ever to take a stand in support of free speech.

We Actually Have Four Major Ideologies in Competition, Rather than Two

In recent years, narratives stating 'why I left the left' or 'why I left the right' have proliferated in the online media. One of the reasons is because partisans naturally love a defection story, because it gives their side credibility. However, in the past decade, more people than usual reported changing sides, or at least feeling newly politically homeless. Additionally, many of these people say that they themselves did not change, but rather, their former comrades changed and left them behind. Given the frequency this phenomenon has appeared, I think it must represent something real. But it's perhaps not what you think it is.

For those who are not my regular readers, I will give you a bit of background about my own experiences. I think I have gone through three distinct phases of political development. I

started out identifying with the 'progressive' side of politics when I was in college in the 2000s. We opposed the Iraq War and the religious right together. Later, in the 2010s, I found myself increasingly dissatisfied with a left that kept mainstreaming certain controversial ideas from academic philosophy, to build a new illiberal politics. I was surprised to find common ground with some on the right, at least on opposing this new ideology that was threatening to supplant old-school liberalism. Still later on, starting in the past few years, I have been getting increasingly alarmed at the authoritarian-populist New Right's agenda, and more and more I am feeling like this is the biggest threat to our freedom right now.

If we used the conventional left-right dichotomy to describe my political movements over the years, I guess you could characterize me as being on the 'left' and in opposition to the 'right' in the 2000s, leaving the left for the center and even finding some common ground with the

'right' to oppose the changed 'left' somewhere in the 2010s, and then parting ways with a changing 'right' to stand firmly against them in the center in the 2020s. In a way, I guess I 'left the left' at one point, and then later at least 'parted ways with the right' at another point, because my attitude towards them turned rapidly from sort of friendly to skeptical, even though I was never really in the right per se. You could even say I have been all over the map politically, which would kind of make sense because I have long felt politically homeless. I would also say that I haven't changed much, but both the left and the right have undergone all kinds of changes in the past two decades.

However, what I have realized with the passage of time is that there is a major part of the 'left' I agree with but another major part that I vehemently disagree with, and it is the same with the 'right'. Thus overall, I could agree more with either the 'left' or the 'right' depending on which element was dominant on each side at

the time. I did a lot of reading, thinking and philosophizing, and eventually came up with the following: the 'left' or 'progressive' side of contemporary Western politics, broadly speaking, consists of numerous distinct philosophies, with the two major ones being 'constructionism' and 'utilitarianism'. The 'right' or 'conservative' (colloquially speaking) side likewise consists of numerous philosophies, with the two major ones being 'organicism' and 'reactionism'. Basically, I agree with utilitarianism and organicism, but strongly disagree with constructionism and reactionism. (Note that I'm not a utilitarian philosophically, but I do often agree with the utilitarian approach when it comes to practical politics.) On this, I haven't changed at all in the past two decades. But the balance of forces within both the 'left' and the 'right' had undergone several changes during this period, which led to me shifting back and forth as to which side I seemed to agree with more.

Let me explain what each major philosophy is first.

Constructionism sees society as made up of interlocking socially constructed systems of oppression, historically constructed to favor the privileged, or the 'oppressors', in society, like white people, men, straight people, and so on. It sees the key to progress as deconstructing these social constructs, and then reconstructing society in a radically different way. Postmodernism and critical theory are the 'tools' that could be used in the process of first challenging, and then deconstructing, these social constructs. In the constructionist worldview, gradual and piecemeal reform, often favored by utilitarians, can only prop up the current system, and are therefore seen as largely useless.

Utilitarianism sees the goal of politics as to help as many people achieve as great an amount of

happiness as possible, and avoid as much suffering as possible. It is descended from the confidence in rationality driving social progress found in the Enlightenment and classical liberalism. Utilitarian progressive-liberalism has a long history, descending from the great British thinkers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. When one argues that gay marriage should be legal because it would make gay couples happy while not harming anyone else, or that abortion should be legal because women would be harmed by being forced to carry unviable and/or unwanted pregnancies, one would be making a utilitarian argument.

Organicism is what I sometimes call 'genuine philosophical conservatism', as it represents the position of great historical conservative thinkers like Edmund Burke. Organicism does not oppose all change, indeed it was Burke himself who said that 'a state without the means of change is without the means of its conservation'. Burke clearly understood the necessity of allowing

justified change to happen so that the overall picture of society could be effectively conserved. Organicists do not oppose all change, but they strongly oppose change that is rooted in abstract ideas and philosophy, that aims to sweep away long-standing tradition rather than improve upon it, and that is not shown to be practically necessary but merely theoretically justified. Burke developed his ideas during the French Revolution, when radical change that was justified on abstract philosophy, and explicitly aimed at destroying long-standing traditions, were implemented by some misguided revolutionaries. This stands in contrast to, for example, the American Revolution which happened during the same generation, where the aim was to establish good government and protect individual liberty, rather than to sweep away everything that existed. The American Revolution was an example of change that many organicists could accept, the French Revolution contained many elements that were unacceptable to the organicists on the other hand. The reason is

because organicists believe that society is a complex thing that cannot be reduced to theories and abstractions. Therefore, radical change based on abstract philosophy alone is almost certainly going to have unintended bad consequences. This is why the organicists believe that any change must be rooted in the existing society's traditions and needs, and gradually evolve over time, if it is to be a good change.

Reactionism is basically the view that social change should be indiscriminately opposed, and at all costs. This, of course, is very different from organicism, which actually recognizes that the right kind of change and reform is necessary. Reactionaries often glorify an imagined past, which leads to a view of society as fallen or corrupted, which in turn justifies their strident opposition to all proposals for further change (because such ideas are the product of a fallen society), and their desire to undo at least relatively recent changes. Unlike organicists,

who actually strive to protect all of our long-standing values and institutions for future generations (Edmund Burke famously said that 'society is indeed a contract... between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born'), reactionaries don't mind knocking over these things if they deem it necessary to stop further social change, or if it enables them to roll back some relatively recent social changes. Generally speaking, reactionism has no use for the intellectual refinement, objectivity and cautiousness that characterize organicists. Instead, reactionaries are emotionally charged, and often conspiracy minded, which are two of the reasons why they mindlessly oppose change rather than take a rational look at what is actually being offered.

Now, let's discuss how the two ideologies that are supposedly on the 'same side' nevertheless contradict, and at times could actively be in conflict with, each other.

Constructionism vs Utilitarianism on the left: In the constructionist worldview, gradual and piecemeal reforms, often favored by utilitarians, can only prop up the current system, and are therefore seen as largely useless. On the other hand, utilitarianism is agnostic as to whether our society is made up of interlocking socially constructed systems of oppression. Utilitarians want more people to be happy (or at least suffer less) in the here and now, and if 'deconstructing systems of oppression' does not clearly lead to this, they have no reason to support it. Also, this is not often pointed out, but constructionist activism would actually be opposed by utilitarianism if it would lead to more suffering in the here and now. Constructionist might believe that the process of things getting worse at first is needed for 'true' progress, but utilitarians would not agree. Where utilitarians see constructionist activism as leading to unnecessary suffering, they would be opposed to it. This is actually one of the biggest reasons why, in the 2010s, when constructionists briefly seized the narrative on

the left, some utilitarians decided to 'leave the left'. Many 'anti-woke liberals' are actually utilitarians (with the remaining being moderate organicists).

Organicism vs Reactionism on the right: Organicists and reactionaries can work together well when they are both committed to opposing the kind of change proposed by constructionists. However, regarding the kind of change proposed by utilitarians, they are more likely to disagree, because organicists can accept social change under the right circumstances, while reactionaries cannot. For example, many organicists have come to accept the legalization of gay marriage in recent years, but it seems most reactionaries cannot accept it no matter what. Therefore, organicists and reactionaries (and even some utilitarians) could form an effective alliance whenever the constructionists are dominant on the left, such as in the 2010s or the 1960s-70s. However, when utilitarians take back control of the left

(like they did in recent years), this alliance inevitably weakens. If, at this time, the reactionaries attempt to seize control of the right, it would make the organicists even more uncomfortable about being in the same tent as the reactionaries. This is why, many moderate conservatives, who are actually organicists, are 'leaving the right' in the era of Trump and the New Right, or at least taking a firm stance against the rise of the authoritarian-populist New Right, who are actually reactionaries.

And then, let's look at the two pairs of 'classical' 'left-right' conflicts:

Constructionism (L) vs Organicism (R): Constructionism and organicism are inherently opposed to each other, because their respective underlying worldviews are diametrically opposed and incompatible. Organicists believe that whatever already exists, while it might not be perfect, nevertheless represents many

generations of wisdom and lived experience, and hence should be cherished. On the other hand, constructionists believe that whatever already exists is largely the product of historical power relations, is therefore oppressive to women and minorities, and hence should be challenged and deconstructed. Another important point is that constructionists believe that philosophical theory offers them accurate insights as to how the status quo can be challenged and dismantled, but this would constitute an attempt to radically change society based on abstract theory alone, which the organicists would certainly oppose. Therefore, constructionism and organicism are opposites in their most fundamental views about the nature of society and humanity, and cannot be reconciled at all.

Utilitarianism (L) vs Reactionism (R):
Utilitarianism and reactionism are also inevitably going to be opposed to each other on multiple issues. This is because utilitarians

would embrace change whenever it is justified by the change creating more happiness or reducing suffering, which means they would naturally be taking the 'progressive' side in many debates. On the other hand, reactionaries, by definition, almost always oppose change, because they see it all as the product of a fallen society. This inevitably puts them on a collision course with utilitarians who believe change can make things better. There is therefore no world in which the utilitarian and the reactionary could get along with each other.

Finally, we need to examine the remaining two, less talked about, 'left-right' pairs:

Utilitarianism (L) vs Organicism (R): there is actually not much incompatibility between these two factions. They are the only pair of factions that can actually get along with each other, but the tragedy is that they are often separated by the left-right political divide in

two-party systems. In fact, I have long argued that a synthesis of utilitarianism (what I called 'practical progressivism') and organicism (what I called 'moderate conservatism') would lead to a sustainable reformism, because the organicist philosophy would keep the progressive impulse of the utilitarians grounded in practical reality, and prevent well-intentioned compassionate utilitarians from being confused about their mission by what is essentially constructionist propaganda, for lack of a better word. Organicism could also help make the utilitarian case for change, simply by its arguments against constructionism. To bring utilitarianism and organicism together, we first have to dismantle the artificial left-right divide.

Constructionism (L) vs Reactionism (R): these two are the ultimate opposites, and they both pride themselves on being anti-establishment because they were marginalized in mainstream politics until recently. A common fantasy among both constructionists and reactionaries is that,

after the moderates in the middle (like the utilitarians and the organicists) have been eliminated from the competition one way or another, there will one day be a big fight between these two extremes, which will define the future of humanity. However, in real life right now, there are not many opportunities for these two factions to actually fight each other directly, because of the existence of the many moderates coming between them. What is important to understand, however, is how the fantasy of fighting and winning against the other extreme shapes the mentality of both constructionists and reactionaries.

I believe that thoroughly understanding how things play out between the four worldviews, and where the potential points for conflict, cooperation and deception are, is going to be very important in helping us navigate the current Western political landscape.

On Pro-Freedom vs Anti-Freedom Views of Society

I want to build upon my recent observation that there are actually four competing ideologies or philosophies in the Western political landscape right now, and discuss how we can defend and advance the cause of freedom in this particular landscape. Basically, the four ideologies are constructionism and utilitarianism on the 'progressive' or 'left' side, and organicism and reactionism on the 'conservative' or 'right' side. Constructionism is the belief that society is made up of interlocking systems of oppression which are socially constructed, and the dismantling of these social constructs is required for the liberation of women and minorities. Utilitarianism is the belief that policy decisions should be aimed at increasing happiness, or at least reducing suffering, as much as possible. Utilitarian liberalism has a long history, going back to the 19th century British thinkers Jeremy Bentham and John

Stuart Mill. Organicism is the belief that society, as it exists, is the product of many centuries of lived experience and wisdom, and on this ground it opposes attempts to abruptly and radically change society, especially if it is rooted in abstract philosophy alone. It is the core essence of classical conservative thinking, going back to thinkers like Edmund Burke. Finally, reactionism is the belief that society is fallen, and nothing good can come out of it, so all proposals for change must be rejected, except for proposals to turn back the clock to a previous glorious age. Given that reactionaries think that modern society, with its guarantees of individual freedom, is a fallen state, they have no problem with trampling on long-standing guarantees of freedom to achieve their backwards-looking utopia. So this is a summary of the four ideologies we have. You can read my previous article if you want a more detailed explanation.

Of the four ideologies, constructionism and reactionism are fundamentally illiberal. Constructionism demands that existing society, as a whole, be deconstructed for the sake of what they see as justice for women and minorities. This would include radically changing the language we use, the social norms we have, the way we see historical events, and so on. Given that their demands are put in terms of justice and ending oppression, there can be no compromise with those that don't want it to happen, even if they are the vast majority of the population. Therefore, such a program must be enforceable via undemocratic and illiberal means, including by limiting free speech if necessary. On the other extreme, reactionism fundamentally sees our present society as fallen, which leads to the view that 'rescuing' society back to a previous glorious state should take precedence over respecting the preferences of those currently living in, and shaped by, the 'fallen' society. Therefore, reactionism does not have any respect for freedom, democracy, or indeed anything else

that stands in the way of their glorious restoration. There have been no successful 'glorious restorations' yet in the West, but I guess Iran's 20th century Islamic Revolution, or alternatively the fictional utopia of Gilead in The Handmaid's Tale, could give us insights as to what it would look like. It is clear that both constructionism and reactionism are enemies of freedom.

Luckily, the other two ideologies are much more compatible with freedom. Although utilitarianism and liberalism are fundamentally different as one emphasizes maximizing happiness and the other emphasizes maximizing freedom, there has been a strand of liberalism justified on utilitarianism going all the way back to John Stuart Mill, which just shows how liberalism and utilitarianism, and their core ideals of freedom and happiness, usually go hand in hand. After all, you can't really make people happy without respecting their freedom. When one says that gay marriage should be

legal because gay couples deserve to be happy too, one is making both a utilitarian and a libertarian argument, for example. On the other hand, organicism strives to protect the long-standing values and institutions we have, because they represent many generations of lived experience and wisdom. At least in the English-speaking West, this would have to include a long tradition of guarantees of basic freedoms, going all the way back to the Magna Carta. Putting it simply, utilitarianism seeks to advance happiness, and in the process often advances freedom, and organicism seeks to protect the freedoms we already have from attacks by authoritarian forces. Therefore, in many ways, utilitarianism and organicism largely overlap with the concepts of 'positive libertarianism' and 'critical libertarianism' that I talked about last time as constituting a 'dialectic of freedom'. This is to say, in our current society and political landscape, 'positive libertarianism' is mostly represented by utilitarians, and 'critical libertarianism' is mostly represented by organicists. This means if we can get utilitarians

and organicists to work together in a productive dialogue, we would have the best hope of maintaining and advancing freedom.

In conclusion, the hope for freedom in the West right now, and for the foreseeable future, lies in promoting both utilitarianism and organicism, and especially a productive dialogue between the two, and also in successfully arguing against both constructionism and reactionism, the ideologies promoted by the illiberal-left and the illiberal-right respectively. Going forward, I will be looking at how we can achieve this in further detail, from multiple angles. In particular, I will be looking at the intra-left argument for utilitarianism over constructionism, the intra-right argument for organicism over reactionism, as well as the very important but often overlooked arguments of organicism vs constructionism, and utilitarianism vs reactionism. I think getting to the bottom of all this is essential for building a 21st-century framework to defend and advance freedom.

A Traditional Liberal Critique of National Conservatism

This is a 'traditional liberal' critique of the National Conservative movement (NatCon). My aim is to demonstrate, from a traditional liberal point of view, why the NatCons are fundamentally wrong about what the 'conservative' position should be in the English-speaking West, and are hence promoting an absurd and dangerous ideology.

Firstly, I need to define the 'traditional liberal' position. My view has long been that liberalism is the product of historical circumstances of Western society, and hence not universal. 'Traditional liberals' differ from 'universal liberals' in that we believe that liberalism, at least as we understand and practice it currently, is rooted in a Western tradition, and is not portable to other contexts. Hence, NatCon concerns of 'liberal imperialism', or Western

liberals attempting to impose their values on other countries and cultures, would not be supported by traditional liberals. For example, the idea that we can or should 'spread democracy' to the Middle East, which led to the Iraq War, would not be accepted by a traditional liberal.

If the NatCon was merely concerned about the neoconservative-neoliberal pro-interventionist foreign policy position, then the traditional liberal would wholeheartedly agree with them. Traditional liberals are anti-interventionist, period. In fact, I suspect the traditional liberal would be even more thoroughly and consistently anti-interventionist than the NatCon. The NatCon might not support interventions to 'spread democracy', but they might still calculate that interventionism might be justified on the grounds of national interest. Indeed, there is a strong tradition of imperialism on the right, that has nothing to do with 'spreading democracy'. Also, while NatCons

might not support the Bush-43 doctrine of 'spreading democracy', there is still nothing to prevent them from supporting his doctrine of 'pre-emptive strike', otherwise known as 'better safe than sorry'. On the other hand, traditional liberals are committed to the classical liberal idea that it is in the interests of all nations to peacefully conduct trade, and to avoid war so that peaceful trade can happen. Hence, my view is that the true traditional liberal position would be to oppose any and all interventionism, under all circumstances. My personal view is that, for the honest liberal, the only justification for war is self defense.

From the traditional liberal point of view, liberalism is itself the product of the Western political tradition, particularly the tradition of the English-speaking West. Historical events unique to the English-speaking West, including the Magna Carta, the philosophy of John Locke, the system of governance set up by America's founding fathers, the liberal reforms introduced

(mostly) by the Whigs in Britain, all led to the modern English-speaking West having a clearly liberal foundation to its politics, and by extension, its society and culture. The liberal tradition is the inheritance of the English-speaking West, and therefore the proper conservative position in the English-speaking West is none other than to uphold the liberal tradition, and defend it from those who wish to damage it or replace it with something else. This would mean taking a strong stance against any attempt to destroy and supplant liberalism domestically, including from the postmodern-anarchist left, and yes, from the lately insurgent anti-liberal right, including the NatCons.

From the traditional liberal point of view, the NatCon ideology would therefore be an enemy of those taking the proper conservative position of vigorously defending liberalism domestically. This has nothing to do with 'liberal imperialism', as we have no desire to spread liberalism to other countries at all. Rather, we need to

defend liberalism from anti-liberal threats domestically, of which the NatCon movement is one. From what we see, the NatCon movement is effectively trying to import a foreign tradition of 'conservative nationalism', and sell it as a form of 'conservatism' in the English-speaking West. This is utterly dishonest. What is considered 'conservative' in another country could indeed be radical in the English-speaking West. As traditional liberals, we have no problem if Hungary (a favorite of NatCon supporters) wants to be an 'illiberal democracy'. It's just like how we have no problem if some Middle Eastern countries want to have Sharia Law. Each to their own. However, we do have a problem if someone wants to supplant our great liberal tradition with Hungarian-style illiberal democracy. Let's make this clear.

While a traditional liberal generally agrees with the NatCon on opposing an interventionist foreign policy, when it comes to domestic policy, we have irreconcilable differences. And

according to the NatCon logic of putting one's country's citizens first, which a traditional liberal would not have any reason to object to, domestic policy should be more important than foreign policy, which would mean our differences in domestic policy would outweigh our agreements on anti-interventionism. This means there can never be any alliance between traditional liberals and NatCons, other than in coming together to oppose specific wars.

Why the Left and the Right both Ultimately Lead to Chaos

Much has been said about the idea that the Left represents chaos, and the Right represents order. Let's look at the idea that the Left represents chaos first. Historically, this was certainly not true. Nobody would think that FDR represented chaos, even though he was arguably the most left-wing president in American history. President Obama was also significantly to the left of center back in 2008 when he was elected, yet he clearly didn't represent chaos. On the other hand, the 2010s Western left, deeply inspired by postmodern critical theory and anarchist philosophy, did represent chaos. De-platforming speakers was chaos. Trying to deconstruct everything was chaos. Invalidating all tradition and hierarchy was clearly a recipe for chaos. Defunding the police would predictably lead to chaos. Much of what happened during BLM 2020, especially things like CHAZ, were total chaos without any

constructive upside whatsoever. Therefore, my conclusion is that, the idea that the Left represents chaos while the Right represents order was an invention of the 2010s, when some parts of the Left regrettably decided to embrace an ideology that led to chaos, and the Right took the self-congratulatory attitude that they were better because they at least stood for order.

However, while order is generally preferable to chaos, all order is not equally good, because there is a difference between ordered liberty and ordered oppression, just as there is a difference between just and unjust order, productive and counterproductive order, adaptive and maladaptive order, and so on. Therefore, we should strive to promote good order, and not just the existence of order itself. The question then becomes, what leads to good order? History shows us that things like rationality, objectivity, honesty, compassion and compromise are conducive to good order, while

things like tribalism, deceit, irrationality and hypocrisy lead to bad order. An honest assessment of recent Western right-wing politics would show that it has not been doing very much to promote what leads to good order, while it has been doing much more to promote what leads to bad order. This is why the results of right-wing politics has generally been an unjust and at times oppressive kind of order, rather than the good kind of order. This, in turn, has led many people to not just reject the bad order that has been created by right-wing politics, but even embrace the chaos of the postmodern left, to burn it all down. This, indeed, is the story of Western society and culture for at least the past 60 years. The oppressiveness of right-wing order ultimately leads people to want to burn it all down eventually, which leads to more and more chaos over time. This is why supporting the Right as it exists would only bring about more chaos down the road. An order that is so bad that it leads to a significant number of people preferring chaos

is clearly not sustainable. Only a good order is sustainable, especially in the long term.

The question we need to ask here is, why does right-wing politics, as it exists, tend to promote bad order? The answer lies in the incentives, as well as the forces that are part of the Right coalition. Let's talk about the incentives first. Right-wing politics has long marketed itself to voters who are more motivated by fear. This is why the right has run many campaigns on moral panic. However, moral panics lead to heightened emotions, irrationality, tribalism, a loss of objectivity and balance, and a reduced capacity to be compassionate or to seek compromise. Hence, what an election strategist might consider good for their party ends up being harmful for society as whole in the longer run. It's like eating lots of junk food every day. It might feel good for a while, but eventually you feel the health effects. The situation here is frankly getting worse because of the rise of online influencer culture. Right-wing influencers

have unleashed coordinated moral panic campaigns that are more emotionally intense than anything the traditional media was ever capable of. The collective bias in their framing of the issues increases exponentially, as they feed off and build upon each others' narratives. I'm worried that this is turning more and more people towards extremist politics as a result.

And then there is the matter of which forces having the power and money within the Right. For example, the religious right's worldview and policies might not be very popular, and most of them probably would not pass a referendum. However, they have a significant amount of power, and represent a substantial proportion of donors, within the political Right. This is why the Right can't drop its religious authoritarians, even as they make it very difficult for the Right to gain support among young people, especially young women. The fact that the Trump campaign started out as clearly not very religious back in 2016, but has gotten more and

more religious over time, demonstrates the power the religious right has over the Republican Party. The religious right promotes certain things, like hardline anti-LGBT ideology, that don't lead to good order objectively, because of their theological commitments. The fact that the electorate has increasingly rejected religiously motivated policies has only caused these policy stances to be promoted and enacted via dishonest means, which moves society further away from good order. Another example is the fossil fuel lobby. Again, climate issues are a major reason for the Right being unpopular among young people, and that they still can't fix this by taking climate change seriously just shows the power of the fossil fuel lobby within the Right. The vested interests of the fossil fuel lobby prevents any action to address climate change, which then necessitates the promotion of a climate denialist belief system that flies in the face of objective scientific evidence. This violation of both honesty and objectivity clearly does not serve the cause of good order at all. But then,

political power and the interests of big donors sometimes conflict with the requirements of good order, and the Right has shown that they will choose power and money every time.

In conclusion, while the Left has regrettably represented chaos in recent years, you wouldn't find good order on the Right either. You won't find good order on the Right because it ultimately prefers winning elections, being in power, and getting lots of donor money instead. The Right has made the ultimate bargain with the devil, again and again: doing things that are deleterious to good order, in exchange for advancing their own selfish interests. Given that bad order is unsustainable and will ultimately give way to chaos, the Right, then, ultimately promotes chaos too, especially in the long term. Therefore, if you don't want chaos, the only way is to reject both the Left and the Right, and commit to the mental independence required to secure the conditions that are conducive to good order. If more people are willing to choose

this path, then we will have a good order. I can't see any other way, to be honest.

Political Moderates Must Stop Being Fearful Sitting Ducks

These days, political moderates across the West are living in perpetual fear. This fear has paralyzed us, and made us weak and unattractive. We really need to get out of this state, and come out fighting for our vision. In this article, I will explain what we need to do to overcome the paralysis of the present moment.

The kind of fear political moderates most readily express is the fear of a rising populist right, which champions polarizing and often authoritarian policies. Polls that show Trump beating Biden next year, studies that provide evidence of the extreme educational polarization in countries like the US and the UK, and the shock victories of right-wing populists in places like Italy, Argentina and the Netherlands, are all seen as signs of impending doom by many moderates. Importantly, many moderates

are in a hopeless mood right now, because we don't seem to have figured out a way to stop right-wing populism yet.

However, moderates also suffer from another kind of fear, that is less talked about: the insidious restriction of free speech from the far-left. Incidents of cancel culture, while sporadic and less prominent than right-populist victories, have had a chilling effect on free speech, making many afraid of speaking up. This has hindered much needed discussion on many contentious topics, and allowed the radical left position to become the default position on many issues, in many intellectual circles. Given the radical left position of the 21st century West is often rooted in postmodern critical theory, this also provides a shortcut to legitimize these unsound theories, bypassing the scrutiny and debate that usually takes place before new ideas are widely accepted.

I believe that these two dynamics actually reinforce each other, which is why moderates must try to overcome both at the same time. The normalization of far-left ideas and practices rooted in postmodern critical theory leads to a loss of long-standing norms around free speech, political civility, universalism and more. This provides the perfect excuse for the populist right's authoritarian approach to politics. Frustration towards the package of ideas and practices often referred to as 'wokeness' also sends many voters towards the populist right, something that Democratic strategists seemed to begin to realize after their shockingly poor performance on Election Day 2021. Moreover, we really can't solve the educational polarization problem without truly staring down the postmodern critical theory problem. The working class is never going to accept a politics that is based on philosophical premises far removed from the realities of everyday life. If given a choice between postmodern sophistry and authoritarian populism, they would always choose the latter, even if it is objectively the

greater evil. This is why I have long argued against the approach of many of my fellow moderates who advocate that we 'deal with right-populism first' and 'ignore the distractions on college campuses'. Wokeness is far more than a college campus issue, and we can't deal with the populist right without also dealing with wokeness either.

On the other hand, a strong populist right leads to more support for the view that politics is about power and oppression in left-wing circles, and that old-school liberalism is too weak to fight against the new enemy. This is why, during the four years that Trump was president, support of the far-left swelled to historically high levels. This means that we also can't stop the postmodern far-left without providing an alternative, credible opposition to the populist right. (This is also why the idea that we should support people like Trump and DeSantis to fight wokeness, promoted by people like Dave Rubin

and Christopher Rufo, doesn't make sense at all.)

Overall, it is clear that, to halt the march of the extremists on both sides, those in the middle must come out to fight, rather than continue to be sitting ducks hoping that the center will somehow manage to hold, because it will certainly not hold if we don't change course quickly. Moreover, right now, many people see the moderates as weak, either against the postmodern far-left or the populist right. Nobody wants to join a team of sitting ducks who clearly aren't having much effect on the direction of society. To overcome this, we really need to speak up more about what we truly believe. For example, many moderates have very real concerns about the positions and actions of 'woke' activists, and the influence they are having on center-left parties like the Democrats and Labour, but they decide to give only muted criticism in fear of upsetting their further-left friends and colleagues. On the other

hand, within 'anti-woke' circles, many moderates are concerned about the influence of the populist right, but only hint at their discomfort, or worse, just disengage from anti-woke circles altogether, paving the way for a far-right takeover. All this must change. There must be no more mealy mouthed, apologetic non-criticisms of things that we are, deep down, very concerned about. We must come right out swinging, against the rising tide of extremism on both sides, even if it will upset many people. We didn't ask for it, but right now, we really are in a war on two fronts situation, that we just need to accept, and fight back accordingly.